Palatial Intimacy

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Palatial Intimacy

by TheCosmicPebble

Summary

I allow podfic recordings of my works! I would love to see it

“The problem, Mister Graham, is that you cannot prove anything. And I won’t let you. This is my mind, after all — I’m the one in charge.”

The year is 2030. The FBI has introduced new technology that allows detectives to literally enter the minds of their most stubborn suspects, gathering the facts that the suspects won’t tell them by traveling through their own memories.

FBI profiler Will Graham, not a huge fan of this development, has been recruited to investigate the Chesapeake Ripper case. There are two suspects: Frederick Chilton and Hannibal Lecter, neither of which he has ever met before. He is tasked with going inside the mind of Hannibal Lecter, rifling through his memories, and getting answers — little does he know, however, that Hannibal’s mind is much more vast (and much more beautiful) than he could ever expect.

Notes

I’m just posting this right now to gauge the interest in a fic like this. I really liked the idea when I thought of it and I thought it would be the base for something really interesting! Let me know what you think.

I — The Beginning

Quantico, VA

March 30, 2030

"Alright. Tell me about it."

FBI Inspector Will Graham, forty-one, brown and blue, sauntered down the hallway of Quantico Headquarters with his boss, Jack Crawford. The bags under his eyes were larger than usual, having not slept long before his alarm had startled him. Crawford was smacking on a stick of wintergreen Extra, as if taking his stresses out on the artificial sweetener, and his hands were shoved in his pockets. Neither of the men were in a good mood.

"You looked at the file, right? You should know."

"I know about the case, Jack. Tell me what you're about to make me do."

"We can't get Lecter to talk to anyone. He talked for the first few hours in here, but for about two and a half days no one's heard him say a word. We need to get something, otherwise we can't make a move either way. We can't let him go, but we also can't charge him."

"What's the lawyer claiming, that he didn't do it?"

"Yes. He's claiming Chilton did it, Chilton's lawyer is claiming Lecter did it. Vicious cycle.

Doctor Hannibal Lecter, currently known to the media as "Hannibal the Cannibal," was found to have tens of pounds of human meat in the freezers of his home. They had been artfully slaughtered, pieced apart like a professional butcher would treat Wagyu. They'd found weapons, buzzsaws, recipes, and multitudes of other evidence that led them to believe he'd killed hundreds of people and eaten as much of their bodies as he could. Tire tracks at a recent murder scene had been an exact match for his car.

Meanwhile, Doctor Frederick Chilton was in similar waters. There weren't any clever puns in the news surrounding his name, but the evidence was the same: pounds of human meat, all of the proper materials required to butcher any kind of meat — even the tire tracks were the same. Both men had the exact same tires. Both were also claiming innocence.

Neither of the men had alibis for any of the murders that were suspected to be connected. Chilton claimed with all of his heart that someone was framing him. Lecter did the same, until he stopped talking altogether.

Chilton had told authorities that Lecter had always been off, that he was clearly hiding something. According to all documentations of his life before his arrest, however, this couldn't be farther from the truth — he was a respected surgeon and psychiatrist, a man of the arts, graduate of multiple honorable schools. No one could have seen this coming, according to all witnesses. He was beloved across all fields.

Lecter hadn't said anything about Chilton, and none of the other witnesses had great things to say — he was apparently kind of a dick.

"You've got a bunch of circumstantial evidence, but no concrete proof. So you want me to figure out if he's guilty."

"Yep. Problem is, he won't let anyone inside. This tech is great, but you've got to get around all the consent issues. Maybe soon we'll see more developments."

"I think getting consent is important. It's really important, in fact."

"Not when it comes to something like this. If he did this stuff, he deserves to be tortured. Dozens of people taken, slaughtered, and eaten up. It's disgusting."

"Who's in charge of Chilton?"

Jack came to a stop in front of one of the interrogation offices, punching in the door code. "We're taking care of him after Lecter. I've got my eye on him more. Complete silence for days is suspicious. It's almost like he's in his own world. Spaced out."

"It could be the trauma of being arrested and falsely accused," Will suggested. They entered the main office, standing behind the one-way glass that allowed them to look into the interrogation room.

"Or it could be the hard realization that you're about to get nailed for some truly abhorrent shit, and you'll probably never see the outside world again."

Will finally turned to the window to give the suspect a good look. It was a man in his forties with light brown hair and tan skin. He was staring down at his cuffed hands in disbelief, and the prison jumpsuit hung off of him. He'd clearly lost weight, probably refusing to eat. His cheekbones were defined and his upper lip came down into a perfect Cupid's bow, which he licked nervously. His stare was blank. With him was a blond lawyer, goading him more and more desperately to speak.

"We're thinking that you're a good candidate to talk to him," Jack said. "You're good with reading people. If he won't talk to you, then maybe you can gather clues as to who he will talk to. But hopefully that won't be necessary."

"And if he does talk?"

"We'll bring interrogators in. If he doesn't talk, but seems receptive to you, we'll see if you can ask about the LOOM."

"The LOOM? God, Jack, I didn't know we'd be using that." Will turned away from the window, grimacing. "Really?"

The LOOM, short for "Long-Term Out of Mind," was a newer technology being implemented by the FBI. Through the use of sedatives, hypnotics, and extensive brain wave technology, it was used to quite literally travel into the minds of suspects. It was for those who were extremely stubborn, those who refused to talk to the cops despite the loads of

circumstantial evidence against them. The key word was "circumstantial" — the technology was a last resort, since it was only useful for suspects that couldn't be nailed on evidence alone. A confession was needed, and if they refused to give one, the FBI would instead seek one out through the suspect's memories.

Will hated it. Every story he'd heard about the technology was something out of a dystopian nightmare. Patients going into seizures, false confessions, false memories being used as evidence to lock innocent people away. It hadn't done any good, as far as he was concerned.

"I'm not using that bullshit."

"You're going to use it. Will, it's probably the only way we can get a confession out of this guy. He's refusing to talk. Do you know how useful this kind of technology is?"

"LOOM evidence isn't even admissible in court."

"Not yet, it's not. But combined with all this other evidence, it would be enough to get him into court in the first place. That's all we need: to keep him in custody until we can find more evidence against him. Stop him from getting away."

"It's a complete violation of privacy."

"Not if we get him to consent."

"And what makes you think he'll do that? Besides, it wouldn't be true consent, in such a forced position like this. His lawyer will go crazy."

"If he refuses, it makes him look guilty. I'm sure they don't want that."

"Exactly. It's not consent, it's force."

"I don't think his victims consented to being eaten." Jack scowled.

"What happened to 'innocent until proven guilty'?"

"You should see some of the shit I've seen. Fucking abhorrent."

"Look, I'll talk to him all you want. But I'm not doing anything without clear and full consent. That's not fair. And I don't even know if I'm fit for the LOOM. I only recently had a surgery done, and—"

"Surgery? You didn't tell me that."

"It was fine. Just my appendix. I was in the hospital for, like, less than a day. But that isn't the point." Will shook his head. "I don't think I'm up for this."

"Well, can you at least talk to him? You're good at that. You're good with people, and maybe you can establish a rapport. We'll take it from there."

"Yes. Conversation. It's so old-fashioned, I know." Will rolled his eyes. "I'll go in there and talk. Not promising anything else." He turned to look inside once more. "Can I kick the lawyer out?"

Jack narrowed his eyes in thought. "He probably won't want to be away from his client. You know, in case he says something, or feels forced to say something."

"Alright. I'll work with it." He stepped towards the door, sneaking one last glance at Jack before raising his hand to knock. His knuckles rapped loudly on the industrial door, and he waited a second or two before punching in the code and turning the knob.

Both of the men stared at him warily as he entered, and the doctor had a hint of fear in his eyes. He was trembling, probably cold and scared, and all of this fostered a large wave of empathy in Will. He nodded to the men and walked up to them.

“Doctor Lecter?” Will stuck out his hand. “It’s nice to meet you. My name is Will Graham. I’m an investigator with the Bureau.”

Lecter hesitated, as if waiting for Will to pull some kind of trick, before shaking to the best of his ability. His cuffed left hand hung uselessly beside their handshake.

“I’m just here to talk with you, get a feel for the situation we’re in.” Will took a seat on the adjacent side of the table, hoping to seem more personable that way. “I think we all want similar things here. We want to figure out who did this and, if you’re innocent, make sure that you get out of here as quickly as possible. I wish we didn’t have to hold you here, but all of the evidence has piled up. We’ve got Frederick Chilton under the exact same precautions.”

“My client has been stripped of his rights based on nothing but circumstantial evidence,” the lawyer spat. “You have traumatized him so much that he’s gone nonverbal. He was screened for PTSD, and they found a diagnosis to be probable based on some things from his past. This is only going to bring him down.”

“I know, I know.” Will held up his hands. “I don’t disagree. I think this is harsh. Unfortunately, I’m not in charge. And Doctor, because we haven’t had any verbal confirmations from you, they’re thinking of searching for the truth in other ways.”

“You can’t send my client to court based on this alone. Especially with another suspect.”

“Yes, that’s correct. We’re trying to narrow down which suspect it could be, out of the two of you — that is, of course, if it’s not both of you working together. But I can’t see that, considering how quickly you each would have had to rat the other out. And you two couldn’t be more different.” He smirked, but neither of the other two men budged. “We’ve spent hours talking to witnesses, but no one has revealed anything significant. They’re thinking of using the LOOM.”

“Oh, absolutely not.” The lawyer slapped his palm on the table. “I’m not letting that happen. It’s a complete violation of my client’s autonomy and his rights. And that technology is much too dangerous.”

“I don’t want to use it either. That’s the issue.” Will leaned forward. “Doctor, I’m not going to let them do a single thing to you without your clear and full consent. But we wouldn’t even have to worry about that if we can have you talk to us. We’re not out to get you. We’re not in this to hurt you. If you have nothing to hide, then I promise I’ll do my best to take care of you.”

Lecter just stared at him.

“I know you have a great career. You’re successful in every field you’ve applied yourself to. I don’t think you’re the type of person who would sacrifice it all just for something so violent. You had the unfortunate traits of being a chef, a butcher, and someone is using that against you. If that’s really the case, then tell me. We can work this out, Hannibal.”

“Doctor, you don’t have to say anything. Don’t worry about him.” The lawyer put a hand on Lecter’s shoulder.

“You don’t have to say anything,” Will repeated in assurance, “except to tell me that you’re willing to cooperate. Just a ‘yes’ would be enough. That way, I can hold off the crew and convince them to not use the LOOM for now. I don’t want to put you in that kind of danger anyway.”

The lawyer glowered at him. “Really? Talking didn’t seem to work before. No one is believing him. You’re treating him like a pig.”

Lecter’s face softened, and with a blink a small tear began to run down his cheek. He closed his eyes and leaned his head back, breathing deeply.

“Look, you’re handling it a lot better than Chilton. He’s only making things worse for himself with the way he’s acting. There’s got to be something we can use to prove your innocence,” Will said. “We can figure it out. I’ll work with both of you, I promise.”

“So far, you’ve taken an innocent man away from his home, traumatized him, refused to believe a word he said, and now you’re threatening to completely invade the privacy of his own mind. He has every reason to not want to work with you.”

Lecter suddenly cleared his throat, startling both of them. His eyes opened, dark brown boring into Will’s blue, and a new, albeit shaky, determination was in them. His tongue started out to moisten his narrow lips.

“Use the LOOM,” Lecter said. His voice was gravelly and accented, something European.

Both Will and the lawyer gawked at him. Will tried to keep his composure as he spoke again. “Doctor…I really appreciate you speaking with me. Can we talk more? Can you tell me how to help you?”

“Use the LOOM,” he said again. “I want them to use it.”

His lawyer butted in. “Oh, no, Doctor, I don’t think you get it. This technology has given the world nothing but trouble. They’ve gotten a lot of false confessions and locked innocent people up. It’s made people sick, nearly killed some.”

“I didn’t do this.” Lecter was looking only at Will now, the plea for Will to believe him in his voice. “I need them to know I didn’t.”

“We could probably do better convincing with some chats than with the LOOM.”

“They want to use the LOOM. They didn’t believe me before. If this makes them believe me…I want it. I don’t want to go in circles.”

Will’s shoulders fell. “Okay, Doctor. If that’s what you’re requesting, I’ll pass it on. But, just so you know, you have every right to refuse the treatment right up until the moment they turn

the machine on. We will brief you more on what it entails later on. I'm not going to let them do a single thing unless we've still got your clear and full consent."

"Who would be entering his brain?" The lawyer sat with his arms crossed, clearly unhappy.

"When I talked with my boss about it, it sounded like it was going to be me. I'm alright with that, if you all are."

"You have to promise to give my client the benefit of the doubt. And you have to be extremely cautious about the information you collect. I'm not letting this turn into some false evidence. And if anything happens to him physically or mentally, I'm suing the absolute *fuck* out of you all. Understand?"

"Completely. And you can always ask for me if you change your mind and would rather talk, Doctor. I'll be there, okay?" Will stood. "Is there anything else I can do for you all?"

"As soon as possible." Lecter tapped his foot. "I want them to do it as soon as possible. I need to get out of here."

"Of course." Will went for another handshake. "If you're innocent, your mind will show it. I'll be extremely careful, and you can always change your mind. Even between sessions, you can decide you don't want more."

"Sessions? There's more than one?" Once again, the lawyer was getting worked up. Will nodded, keeping his voice low to placate him.

"Yes. We often don't get enough information from just one probe. We usually need a few weeks of data."

"You're going to keep him here for *weeks*?"

“It depends on what we find. We might be able to have him out on probation or house arrest soon, if nothing incriminating comes up the first few times. That’s my goal, at least.”

“Please.” The idea of being in the prison cell for weeks must have hit Lecter, as another tear took the same track down his cheek that the other one had.

“I promise, I’m going to do my best with this.” Will nodded his head. “I promise.”

II — The Family

"Hey, you." Will rustled his stepson's hair as he walked past the couch, where the boy was sitting watching baseball. Wally slapped his hand away, grunting, but Will caught a smile on his face as he walked away.

"And hey, you." He held his arms to wrap around Molly's waist, kissing her cheek. She placed her hand on his, the other one busy with the skillet. "What are you up to?"

"Working on my next novel," Molly quipped. "I'm obviously browning ground beef."

"For who? The most well behaved member of this family, by chance?" He bent down to scratch the head of their chocolate Lab. "Roscoe clearly wants some."

"He can't have any. It has garlic and onion in it."

"Well, that explains why it smells so good." Will rested his chin on Molly's shoulder. Her blonde hair was soft against his cheek. "How was your day?"

"Mundane. You?"

"Anything but." He stared down at the skillet. Yellow bubbles of beef fat crackled and popped, and he was suddenly reminded of the human meat that had been found in two men's homes. He suppressed a shudder. "We're in a predicament."

"I'm pretty good at puzzles."

Will relayed the situation to her, forgoing any extremely graphic details. He didn't want to erase everyone's appetite. She listened quietly, and when he was done she contemplated all of it without a word.

"First things first, you're not using the LOOM." She switched off the gas stove. "Get me a spoon."

Will did. She began to drain the fat, scooping the golden liquid into a can from the recycling. "I haven't heard anything good about the LOOM. I don't want you using something like that. God forbid you have some terrible reaction, and then you're never the same again."

"I know. I don't want that, either. And I don't want that for Doctor Lecter. I don't want to agree to something that could turn into a catastrophe."

"Then don't use it. End of story. Jack can't force you into it, and if he does, we're about to get a lot of money from a lawsuit."

"Well...we're about to get a lot of money anyway," Will said. This was the part that left him on the fence, that stopped him from refusing entirely. "He offered me money to do it with Doctor Lecter. He was only going to give it to me at first if I was successful, but I talked him into giving it to me after the first session no matter the outcome. That's how much he wants me on this."

"Okay. So how much? Like, a few hundred?"

Will glanced towards the living room, making sure Wally was still engaged with the TV. He lowered his voice. "He offered me seventy-five grand."

Molly nearly lost her grip on the pan, and Will reached out to help her. They both exhaled in relief when none of the hot fat spilled over the sides. "You're kidding."

"I'm not."

"That's a whole year of income for most people, Will."

"I made sure I heard him right. He wrote it down. I saw the zeroes."

Molly fell back into silence. She set the spoon down on the spoon rest, put the pan down, and closed her eyes. "Shit. We could do a whole lot with that money, Will."

"I know. College, for one thing."

"It would help a whole lot. But I don't know if it's worth the risk."

"Well, if it doesn't work properly, then you'll get the money from my life insurance. It's kind of a win-win."

"God, that's not funny, Will." Molly turned to him with an icy glare that made him wither. "Don't say that."

"Okay. You're right, I'm sorry." He pulled her closer. Every part of her was soft. "That was stupid."

"...I've already lost one husband. I don't know what I would do if...if something happened to you. If you died, too, and it could have been prevented."

"The stories on the news are very rare. There are plenty of good things that come out of this, too. The people who had seizures were already epileptic. The false memories don't have anything to do with me. They can't penalize me for relaying something I saw."

"Don't they drug you? And it's a lot of electrical stimulation? What if you don't wake up? Or get brain damage? This is some invasive shit."

"I know. We all have the right to worry. But there are doctors on sight watching the brain waves, and they stop the procedure if anything seems out of order. If my gut is turning me against this tomorrow, then I'll know to stop."

"Tomorrow?"

Will sighed. "Yeah. Tomorrow."

Molly rubbed her temple. "Jack is such an asshole..."

"I can't stand to watch this poor man be prosecuted if he didn't do anything wrong." Will frowned. "I want to help him out, and if this is the way to do it, then it is. They won't listen to him any other way."

"You're too good of a person."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that. Just a little too empathetic."

"You're going to be careful." Molly looked him in the eyes with a sharp gaze. "You're going to listen to your intuition, and you're not going to get lost in yourself or this other guy's mind. Don't let him manipulate you, okay? There is still the chance that he did these things, and I don't like the idea of him being in charge of what you see. So you're going to be careful." She squeezed his hand. "Got it?"

"Got it. I swear."

"Good." She nodded, satisfied for the moment, and grabbed the can of leftover beef fat. "If you fuck around, I'll make you drink this."

"I'd rather do that than spend any more time with Jack Crawford, I'll tell you that."

March 31, 2030

Fuck, this is some sci-fi shit.

Will gazed around the room in disbelief, trying to comprehend all of the various cords, wires, and screens that took up an already small space. The lab was dark, and two chairs sat across from a desk where observers would sit behind a monitor. They were going to watch both men's brainwaves, ensuring that nothing went wrong. At the sight of any abnormal activity, they would stop the process. Will hoped with all of his might that the observers were good at their jobs; he'd been the victim of many blackout panic attacks, and he didn't want one of them to pop up and escalate.

When he entered, Hannibal was already there, sitting in the chair on the left. He sat on the very edge of it, not yet leaning back to connect to the headset, staring at the floor. His body was hunched. He looked up and nodded at Will, staring at him for a beat too long, before retreating back inside himself and closing his eyes.

"You're doing us a great service, Will." Jack came up behind Will, startling the living daylights out of him. "We appreciate it."

"Wally needs the help for his college fund. And Doctor Lecter deserves to have the truth he told."

Jack glared down at the doctor. "Yes. He sure does. You're aware of the procedure?"

"Yes. None of it sounds appealing."

"You won't even recognize half of it. Good sedatives and all that."

"Is it healthy to be putting that stuff in me for multiple sessions?"

"It's a really small dose. It's not like it's for pain relief or complete unconsciousness. It's more like trance."

"And you'll be able to trust whether or not what I see is true? False memories happen all the time. We dream of doing things we've never done in real life almost every night. And will I remember everything?"

"Those brain waves will be different. Even if we aren't sure, questioning him about it may be more effective. Or we can search for proper evidence. You should remember a good chunk of the information, since you won't be fully asleep."

"Okay." Will turned away from him, instead focusing on Doctor Lecter. "Hey, Doctor," he said, taking a small step forward. "Are you feeling alright? Are you still wanting to do this? You have every right to change your mind."

Lecter nodded his head, slightly shifting back in the chair to solidify his opinion. Will sighed, nodding.

"Okay. We're in this together." He extended his hand once more to shake. Lecter, surprised by the hospitality, accepted. His grip was warm and firm.

"Okay, everyone, I need all unnecessary parties to clear out!" One of the observers stood from his position behind the desk. "We're going to start things up. Either of you need a bathroom break? Both men shook their heads. "Alright. I need both of you to sit back in those chairs. Nice and snug, okay?"

Once Jack left, Will made his way to the chair on the right, his legs shaking a bit. He sat down, chest tight, and leaned against the back. A technician stood between them. Will situated his feet on the floor, right on top of the prints they'd stamped there, and gripped the

armrests. He turned his head to watch the doctor he strapped up; there was a loose bar around his torso to prevent him from falling out, and they'd undone his handcuffs.

The technician lowered the helmet onto Lecter. The LOOM helmet wasn't as dystopian as the rest of the room; it was small and thin, almost like a baseball cap without the rim. Many cords emerged from the sides, and as Will had his own helmet lowered he felt buttons pressing against his skull and into his ears. The nerves amplified.

"It's going to be okay," he whispered to himself. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Lecter watching him, and when he made eye contact he saw the same amount of uncertainty in the doctor. They both stared at each other, brows furrowed.

"It's going to be okay," Will repeated, louder this time. "We'll be alright."

"You two ready?" The technician now approached with a box of needles and vials. Will averted his eyes. It wasn't the needles — he has no problem with those — it was the medicine that scared him. Sedatives and amobarbital, a powerful hypnotic to slow the brain down. He hates the idea of not being fully in control of his own mind and body, and this was his worst nightmare.

He wanted to spring out of his chair and give up, but he felt like he would be betraying Doctor Lecter if he did. Lecter seemed comfortable with him, and to give up on him so directly would be an insult. The man didn't deserve that. He deserved even the slightest comfort, and if Will could bring it, then that's what he would do.

"Guess so."

The injections were over before he knew it, and now all he had to do was wait for ten minutes. Already, the placebo effect of knowing they were in there was doing its job. His body felt heavy and the room felt taller than it was before. If he tried to move, he wouldn't be able to — but he didn't want to move. He was comfortable. Too heavy to focus on how nervous he'd been.

In the ten minutes that passed, this feeling only multiplied. He wanted to fall asleep, and he'd gone numb from the neck down. He knew most of it was due to the hypnotic, since the sedative really wasn't that strong, but it worked wonders anyway. He summoned the strength to look over at Lecter, and it was the hardest thing he'd ever done. It was that last rep of heavy weights at the gym, weak even as he used the very last of his strength.

They turned Lecter's helmet on before his. A hum started around the room, and the doctor suddenly jolted in his seat. It was the sharpest movement Will had seen from him. From there, Lecter's half-lidded eyes rolled into the back of his head, and he slumped. Restraints kept his chin from falling down onto his chest.

They flipped on Will's helmet. A loud buzz entered his ears. He felt something reaching deep inside of his skull, tendrils wrapping around his brain, and his body began to jerk with no warning. He seized tightly before suddenly letting go of everything, darkness consuming his vision and every part of him melting away.

Everything was blurry. Hazy and floaty. He basked in the mindless void for as long as it lasted, a smile forming on his lips. The current then pushed him upwards, invisible waves moving him to a standing position, and things began to solidify beneath him. His feet planted on hard floor, and refreshing air hit his cheeks. He heard faint music, a classical melody. The aroma of ocean air was lovely and familiar.

He opened his eyes, and his mouth dropped open.

It was a beautiful palace, the most grand and intricate piece of architecture he'd ever seen. Gold pillars reached up towards a tall, domed ceiling, a ceiling of stained glass that allowed him to glimpse the blue sky. He was standing on a gold walkway, which stretched miles forward into a massive array of doors left and right. The doors varied in size and intricacy, and they seemed to go on forever. Out of all of the doors, only one lay straight ahead, far out of his reach and yet still so close. He could probably walk forever and never reach it, but it would still tease him from mere meters away.

None of the doors were open. The music was coming from somewhere behind him, so he suspected that was the best bet. He turned.

Hannibal Lecter sat at a grand harpsichord, producing an entrancing melody. His eyes were closed as he swayed with the music, a content smile on his face. He was wearing a very refined suit that made Will feel underdressed; and his hair was artfully done. He looked younger, brighter.

Will moved forward. He was tentative, not wanting to scare the doctor, but at the first sign of movement Lecter stopped playing and opened his eyes. He realized it was Will, and the corners of his eyes crinkled with a bright smile.

"Detective Graham," he said, his voice full of confidence and ease. "I'm so glad you made it in one piece."

III — The Palace

Will, shocked into silence, merely stared at Doctor Lecter with wide eyes. The man stood up from his bench at the harpsichord, fixed his suit jacket, and walked towards him.

"I— Doctor Lecter." Will couldn't believe where he was. From what he'd been told, moving into someone's brain with the LOOM was supposed to be a chaotic experience. It was supposed to be a choppy combination of memories, riding a tsunami of thoughts and visions that were barely comprehensible. He remembered an account that he'd read about online, in which the investigator said it was like a montage of the suspect's behavior. Kill after kill after kill, the man had to watch them back to back. He hadn't gone back to the FBI since.

"Where are we?"

"Really, it's good to see you." Lecter was the one to hold out his hand this time. His wrists were free, and Will could see the prominent veins running up them and through the backs of his hands. They shook. "That process was awful."

"But this isn't...where are we?" Will began looking around in amazement again, but the movement suddenly caused a wave of nausea to spread through him. His vision split in two, and he almost had to crouch on the ground to get his bearings. He put his hands on his knees, blinking. "God. Shit."

"What's wrong? Are you alright?" Lecter rushed to his aid, straightening him up and supporting him with his hands on Will's shoulders. "Do we need to get you out of here?"

"I need...I need to sit." Will held back a heave.

"Of course. Come here; I'll walk us slowly." Lecter carefully led them into the room he'd come from, guiding a dizzy Will to an armchair near the room's massive fireplace. Will sank into the soft cushion, leaning his head back and trying to keep still.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I think I know what's happening, I just...need a moment."

"Take all the time you need."

Will waited for the sickness to subside, which only took a minute or two. He braced himself to open his eyes again, as he was afraid of what he was about to face. Something was going wrong here.

"Okay." Will took one last deep breath and opened his eyes. Doctor Lecter had taken a seat across from him, their chairs close enough that they could reach out and brush fingertips. "I'm sorry."

"There's no reason to apologize. Are you okay?"

"I don't know." Will stared at him. He didn't want to move his head again and start another wave. "Where are we? Is this a dream?"

"Not necessarily. It feels like a dream, though, doesn't it?" Lecter smiled at their surroundings. "It's so beautiful here. It's everything I could ever ask for."

"Are you dreaming, Doctor? Is this some kind of memory?"

"No to both. We're simply existing in my head."

"But...no. No, that's not what's supposed to happen. How is this—"

"Will — can I call you Will?" He waited for Will to nod in agreement. "You look very pale. I think you need to take more time. Get your senses straight. Can you do that for me? Just lean back, close your eyes if you need to, and take it all in."

Will reluctantly followed, exhaling another large breath. From what he could see without moving his head, this room was even more grand than the last one. The fireplace was etched with what looked like thousands of intricate designs, and the blazing fire made the room the perfect temperature. The crackles were soothing. The smell of burning wood grounded him. He heard a distinct pattering coming from somewhere above, but he couldn't bring himself to look up. His eyes must have shifted upwards, though, as Lecter looked for him.

"It's raining," he said. "It's my favorite type of weather. I love being able to watch from the skylight."

Will wanted to look. That was his minuscule goal. He resolved to pay attention to each of his senses closely. As he did, he felt even more alive than he did in the real world. Everything was amplified in a good way. Sounds were crisper, smells were richer, everything was soft and comfortably heavy. He wasn't in a dream or a memory; this was an entirely new realm. It was something that Jack hadn't even thought to tell him about, since no LOOM user had experienced anything like it.

He tilted his head upwards. It was easier to move now, and it didn't make him feel sick. This room had a domed ceiling that was partially made of glass, and Will watched raindrops splat onto the surface from the gray sky.

"Does that make you feel bad?"

"No." Will blinked. "Everything feels better now."

"I'm glad. You just needed to get everything straight. Do you understand what happened?"

"I have to be careful. I think..." He sighed. "So, there's two people involved when you use the LOOM. There's the subject, which is you, and there's the observer, which is me. All they did was send you into your own mind. I had to leap across to someone else's."

"Right. I didn't think about that. The journey must have been even worse for you, then." Lecter frowned.

"Well, I wouldn't say that. It's rough for both of us. But usually the observer just flips through various memories and dreams, watching the subject from third person. They don't really have a body. They're an outside observer. But this...this is a lot different. I'm not an outside observer. I have senses, a body, a mind of my own. I'm alive." He curled his hands into anxious fists. "And I don't think I'm supposed to be. My mind doesn't understand what's going on."

"Oh, it's completely normal," Lecter said. "I went through the same thing. Learning to live in this sort of lucid, adaptive existence is difficult at first."

Will paused. "I don't think I'm following, Doctor. You created this place? You put yourself here?"

"Call me Hannibal. And yes. I've been living off and on in the palace of my mind for my entire life. I built it from my memories, made it more and more grand over time. This used to be a small library, as that's the nicest thing I knew as a child. No matter what it's looked like, though, I've trained myself to live inside of it."

"Why? How do you even go about doing that?"

"By doing what you did just now. Paying deep attention to positive senses and taking them as reality. Learning to expertly block the entire rest of the world out. As for the why, isn't it obvious? It's my own mind. I can do whatever I wish. I feel only what I want to feel, and I can be completely alone and comfortable. Loneliness does not exist. Fear does not exist."

"Is this where you've been, then? When you've refused to talk?"

"Yes. I've let myself zone out and travel here. It's effortless now. I can usually tell if someone outside is talking to me, touching me, but there are times where I'm much too deep to notice."

Will nodded. "I guess I'd much rather be here than in handcuffs."

"Exactly. You're enjoying it, and you don't even get to control it. It's even better when you're the one in power."

"I'm supposed to be seeing your memories. Your thoughts. Where are they?"

"What do you think is behind all of those doors?" Hannibal swept his hand out towards the hallway. "I've got them all organized how I wish. And they're my business alone."

"I don't suppose you'll be showing me any of them?"

Hannibal's gaze turned firm, and he leaned forward slightly. "Will, you are the first person who has treated me with kindness since my arrest. You watched out for me and made sure my opinion was heard and respected. You're a good man. Thank you for that."

"Oh, it— it was nothing. You deserve to be treated with decency. I don't think it's fair to punish you this harshly when you haven't even been proven guilty."

"You're very considerate. I respect that. I would love to keep welcoming you back here. But this is my mind. My space. I would appreciate if you kept to this room only. My memories are not something you can toy with and watch like they're television shows. It's my life. This is my privacy. Please don't go sneaking around without my permission, yes?"

"I won't do that, Hannibal. I promise. But — and this isn't me forming my opinion, since I do want to give you benefit of the doubt — what's to say that your memories of committing those murders aren't behind a door? You could easily choose not to show them to me, and then you look innocent when really, they were hidden in plain sight."

Hannibal's lips turned up in a wry smile. "See, that's the wonderful thing about this place. The problem you face, Will, is that you cannot prove anything. And I won't let you. This is my mimd, after all — I'm the one in charge."

Will felt a coldness in his blood akin to ice water. "Is that you telling me that there's something to prove? That you are hiding something behind the doors?"

"I never said that. I said that you cannot prove anything. There is nothing to prove. I won't let you create some false memory or take a real one out of context. I control what you see. I can't have you wander around without me, or you could get lost in the hallways. Reveal some private secrets that I don't want anyone to know. I'm sure you have some too, yes? That doesn't mean you're a killer."

"I need to have some kind of data to show Jack. To show the FBI."

Hannibal paused. "Correct me if I'm wrong. You used to be a professor, right?"

Will blinked. "Yeah, I still am. At Quantico. Sometimes they just have me come and profile cases. How'd you know?"

"I've been to one of your public lectures. Something about the basics of criminal profiling." Hannibal looked him up and down, nodding. "Yes, it was definitely you. An acquaintance gave me the opportunity to tour Quantico, and I was intrigued to see the kinds of classes they taught."

"Really? Small world. When was this?”

"Oh, about a year ago. We spoke, I believe. But it wasn't for long. You were bombarded by other students, and I figured they mattered more. You're grading them, not me." He smirked. "I'm only just now remembering it, after hearing your voice for a while. You're a very interesting teacher."

"I...thank you. I can't say I remember that, but I wish I could. I've always had a lot on my mind. I'm sorry I didn't recognize you."

"Oh, I didn't recognize you either, at first. Life happens." He waved his hand dismissively. "Here, I've got an idea. That memory is unlocking for me right now, I can feel it. Why don't I show you how this place works?"

Will sprung at the opportunity. "Sure, yeah. I think I'm good to move now."

"Let me know if you're not." Hannibal stood, and Will followed at a much slower pace. "There's no rush."

They began to walk, and Will felt much more grounded than he did before. "So you can sense when memories are open?"

"Yes. Pretty much all of my experiences are located in this palace, behind a door. A lot of them, however, are locked for me. I obviously don't remember every single thing that's ever happened to me. If I were to focus, however, like I did just now, that door is going to unlock until I eventually forget about it again."

"How on earth are you going to find it in all this?"

"That's the nice thing. It can be wherever I choose." They came to a stop very early on in the main hallway, at one of the first doors. It was an unassuming door, the entrance of a middle-class house. "I've decided it'll be here. That way you won't overexert yourself." He put his hand on the doorknob. "This will probably be seen from my point of view, a first-person way, so prepare for that."

Will nodded, his mind roiling in anticipation. Hannibal turned the knob, opening the door.

The inside was simply dark. There was nothing there. Will turned to look at Hannibal, who gestured towards the inside.

"You have to go in," he said.

Will contemplated this, wondering if he should trust the man in front of him. No matter what he chose to do, he was still going to be the one who wasn't in power — the good thing, though, was that eventually he would come out of this mysterious palace and be allowed to go back home. That didn't mean that any tricks Hannibal decided to play were harmless, however.

"I'll come with you," Hannibal said once he noticed Will's hesitation. "Nothing to be scared of." He led the way, stepping inside and making room for Will behind him. Will finally made the decision to follow.

Once both of them were inside, the dark void changed to a view of Will's classroom. He was watching the scene from someone else's eyes, gazing upon himself from the point of view of another. It was an odd feeling, one that humans usually never get to experience outside of pictures or videos. He was seeing himself in a sort of tunnel vision, as the rest of the classroom's patrons were a blurry mess. He watched himself deliver the lecture that he'd given hundreds of times, and his face flushed when he realized just how bored he looked while giving it. *That was embarrassing*.

Will blinked, and the view changed. Now, he was standing right in front of himself. His face was smoother, as if someone had put a filter on it, and his shirt was a blur of shifting colors.

"See how I obviously can't remember the color of your shirt, what the other students looked like, or the really intricate details of your face at the moment," Hannibal said. "Those aspects aren't as clear."

Will was too focused on watching himself to comprehend the conversation they were having. It was polite small talk, and luckily the boredom on his face from earlier had vanished when he spoke to Hannibal. He always tried to be better when it came to one-on-one communication.

"I was still rather new to America," Hannibal admitted. "We talked about that for a little while. I'd spent most of my time in my home country, Paris, Italy…Johns Hopkins only took me in a little while back. I still haven't been here for that long, in the grand scheme of things." He looked over at Will, who was still entranced by the memory. "Are you done here?"

Will shook his head to regain his focus. “Uh, yeah. Yeah, sorry.”

“Don’t apologize when you don’t need to.” Hannibal patted his shoulder and turned around, to which Will followed him out of the room. The door closed by itself behind them, and they were back in the main palace hallway.

“So…every memory is like that?” Will asked. “You have to go through the door, and then you watch it from the outside?”

“Yes. And I would say that practically none of them are false.” His brow furrowed. “Many subjects dream of things that never happened, and that causes some confusion. That won’t happen here. I don’t dream.”

“Seriously?”

“Practically never. When I go to sleep at night, I end up here.” He gazed around the palace in admiration. “I always wake up refreshed, so I don’t see a problem with that.”

“What about—“ Will was cut off by another wave of lightheadedness. He crouched, placing his hands on his knees. “Oh, man.”

“Will? Are you okay?”

“I think I’m…” Will watched as his hands suddenly began to lose their color, their opacity. They were translucent now, fading away, and the sensation quickly traveled up his arms and down his legs. “I’m disappearing. Why am I disappearing?”

“It’s alright. That happens to me,” Hannibal reassured him. “It means you’re waking up.”

“Already? Is the swap over?”

“Must be. Time passes a lot faster here.”

“Wait. Wait, I’m not ready.” He tried to grab onto Hannibal’s wrist, but he merely passed through him like a ghost. “I haven’t learned anything. Can you please talk to us now? You can trust me, Hannibal. You can talk to me. We don’t have to keep doing this.”

“You’ve learned plenty, for a first session.” Hannibal stared at him curiously. “I think I like this better,” he said. “I want to talk to you again, Will. I do trust you. But I’d prefer to do it here.”

Before Will could craft an answer, a black sheet was pulled over his eyes, and the palace vanished.

IV — The Awakening

Will woke with a start, body twitching as his eyes shot open. If it weren't for the assistant at his side taking the helmet off, he would have thrown it off himself as fast as he could. He felt his senses returning to him: first his sight, vision creeping back in, followed by a new awareness of his body, then finally he regained his hearing after the earplugs were taken out.

"Fuck. *Fuck* ." Will tugged the restraints up from his waist. He turned to look at Hannibal, who was also being slowly woken. He took it much better, though, calmly rubbing his bleary eyes and sighing.

"Hannibal." Will stood, his legs wobbling. He walked over to Hannibal's chair and crouched down to his level. "Hannibal, talk to me. Please . I know you can. I'll listen to every word, I promise."

Hannibal looked down at him, and a flash of insecurity passed through his eyes so quickly that Will almost missed it. The doctor, to Will's dismay, shook his head.

"Will," someone hissed from the doorway. Will whipped his head to the side, watching Jack beckon for him to come outside. Will hesitated to stand, wanting to get the last word in.

"Hannibal," he said, "if this is what you want, I'll keep doing it." He considered what he wanted for his end of the bargain. "But you have to promise to show me at least one relevant memory each time. Okay? They have to be relevant. We're going to find out the truth, and you have the ability to be in control of it. Do it with dignity."

He looked into Hannibal's deep brown eyes, and finally the two of them shared a nod. He shook Hannibal's hand.

"Thank you for letting me in. It's a very nice place you've got in there." He smirked, the weight on his shoulders lightening as Hannibal returned a small smile back. Finally satisfied, Will stood and left the room.

“I’m guessing it didn’t work this time?” Jack asked immediately as Will stepped outside. “What went on in there?”

Will furrowed his brow. “What do you mean?”

“Your brain waves were almost completely stable the entire time, both of you. You didn’t even enter REM sleep. It was more of a light trance than actual unconsciousness.”

“Are you serious?” Will’s stomach flipped. It was another unsettling detail to add to this eerie portrait. “I didn’t even go to sleep?”

“It was like you two were half awake, half asleep. Usually we see something much deeper.”

“That can’t be right. I saw things. I felt things.” He remembered acclimating to his senses, thanks to Hannibal. Everything had felt so real, including the weight of Hannibal’s warm hand on his shoulder and the timbre of his voice, so natural and familiar despite only having met the man once briefly.

“You saw things? What did you see?” Jack leapt at the opportunity. “Will, you have to tell me every detail, got it? Nothing is unimportant. Did you get any memories?”

“Slow down.” Will sighed. “The only true memory I saw was a memory of Doctor Lecter and I meeting. Apparently he came to one of my lectures about a year ago, and he remembered my face. We’ve met before, briefly.”

“Shit, really?” Jack grunted. “That’s not good. Damnit.”

“What?”

“The LOOM works best with a subject who knows nothing about the observer. That way there’s no bias, no potential to manipulate.” Jack leaned in closer, lowering his voice. “You’re

not supposed to have met him. But look, it was a small meeting with not a lot of merit. Do me a favor and keep it to yourself, okay? If anyone else finds out about this, they might take you off the case, and that would be even worse. It seems like you're the only one Lecter is receptive to."

"You just said it's not allowed. You don't think he'll try to manipulate me?"

"I think he doesn't know enough about you to do that. Sure, he knows you're a professor." Jack narrowed his eyes. "Unless you told him anything else?"

"No. No, nothing major about my home life or anything." Not yet, at least. Hannibal could easily try to coax that information out of him, and he wasn't sure if he would be able to resist handing it over. He remembered the slight chill in the doctor's voice as he reminded Will that this was his mind, and he was the one who had control over what happened.

"Good. Keep it that way." Jack eyed him up and down. "What else did you see? Or was that it?"

"I saw…" Will thought about how to put it. "I saw what the inside of his mind looked like. It wasn't anything like you told me it would be. It was…a palace. This massive, beautiful building with all kinds of hallways and doors. He had built it to look however he wanted it to, and he could do and feel whatever he wanted. He'd somehow mastered this advanced form of adaptive daydreaming, where he could disappear into an entirely new world."

Jack looked incredulous. "You're sure about that? It wasn't a memory, or a dream, or some kind of fantasy about how he wished things could be?"

"It was so vivid, Jack. It was so real." He glanced through the window of the lab, watching a guard re-cuff Hannibal's hands. Hannibal's expression was impossible to read. "It was like I'd traveled there before, in real life. I was moving around, and I had my own body. I saw and heard and smelled…I felt nauseous at one point, from moving around, and he helped me sit down and regain composure. He told me to pay attention to my surroundings and my senses, and that's how he'd learned to end up in that place. That state of mind."

“He must have found out how to lucid dream. That, or he’s in some kind of trance where he can imagine where he is. The senses can still be strong in trance.”

“I didn’t feel like I was in a trance. Aren’t you kind of aware of it?”

“Typically. But this feels different. It all feels different.”

Jack stared at him for a moment, then he shook his head and walked past Will with a pat on his shoulder. “Go home and think about it, Will,” he said. “I can’t force you to do it again. But it seems like Lecter really likes you — and that’s just what we need.”

“What did it feel like?” Molly whispered in Will’s ear that night, her arm draped across his chest. “Was it weird? Did you feel bad?”

“It was definitely different.” Will relayed the same information that he had to Jack, detailing his feelings and the vividness of it all. Molly listened without a single interjection.

“I don’t think it went how everyone thought it would. But it…it felt so personal. So real.”

“He must have a really vivid imagination. That sounds trippy as hell.”

“Oh, my God, it was awful. The process was really intimidating. They sedated me so I couldn’t move and pumped hypnotics into me. They pumped these brain waves into my ears and jolted me until I fainted. It was some sci-fi torture crap.”

“Then I definitely don’t want you doing that again.” Molly squeezed his shoulder. “I’m not letting you go into danger like that.”

“I know, but Jack wants me to. And Hannibal seems to respond to me only. He won’t talk with anyone else. And he was nothing but friendly to me.” *Except to tell me that he was in control and I couldn’t prove anything.*

“He’s under investigation for murder, Will. Serial murder and cannibalism. His name even rhymes; is that not a good enough sign?”

Will couldn’t help but laugh. “It’s not his fault that that’s his name. He’s European.”

“Most European people are named like…normal things. Charles and Louis and Arthur and shit like that.”

“You’re being rude. Your name is also a drug, so you don’t have room to talk.”

“Whatever, Graham cracker.”

“MDMA.”

They chuckled, their voices receding as they relaxed further into bed. Molly inched closer.

“He’s not talking at all? Despite everyone begging him to?”

“Not a word except to tell me that he wanted to use the LOOM. He won’t speak to anyone — I think I’m the only one who’s really had a conversation with him since his arrest.”

“Kind of makes him sound like a stubborn asshole.”

“I don’t know. He’s panicking. I think he’d more upset than he lets on.”

“See, you’re defending him. You’re too good. I just don’t want you to get hurt.”

“I’ll be okay.” Will leaned in to kiss her forehead. “I’ll be just fine. I’m under constant watch when I’m there. Maybe it gets easier after the first time.”

“Or harder. And it’s great if your boss likes you, or something, but a potential serial killer? I don’t want him to like you.”

“I want him to cooperate with me,” Will said. “That’s all.”

“I don’t want this to be like Italy, Will.”

Will tensed, face flushing. His mind flashed back to his time in the country, where he’d worked under a major police force in Rome. Compounding stress and a major panic attack had nearly sent him into cardiac arrest. He was found one day on the floor of one of the offices, having fainted from the attack, and everyone on board decided it was best if he returned back to his home in America. He was glad for it, as that’s where he met Molly and been recommended for his job at the FBI, but he also hated that things had to end that way — and that it was now being used against him.

“It’s not going to be like Italy. I know better.”

“I’ll be watching you.” She poked his arm.

“Feel free. I’m really good-looking.”

“Okay, Graham cracker. You’re going to bed.”

“Not without some MDMA.” He tilted his head and brought her in for a kiss, embracing her as they began to move together to become one.

V — The Return

April 1, 2030

"Feel like talking today, Lecter?" Jack loomed over the doctor, who was strapped in his chair once more preparing for the LOOM. "Or are we going to find out things the hard way?"

As always, Hannibal didn't respond. Will glared at Jack, eyes narrowing.

"Leave him alone, Jack. That's not helping."

"He's done something." Jack paced around the lab. "You've done something, Doctor. Only the guilty would refuse to talk. The sooner you speak and prove your innocence, the sooner you could be out of here. If you're guilty, you're going to stay here either way until your trial. You might as well give these poor families the truth."

"I'm taking care of it. I'll talk to him," Will snapped. "Get out of here, and let's get this process over with."

"Watch it, Will." Jack glowered at them both before leaving the room, the door closing behind him. Will leaned his head back, sighing.

"I'm sorry, Doctor," he said. "Jack is...he's just Jack. Don't let him scare you."

The moments right before the switch was flipped were a complete blur.

God, I'm so heavy. I'm so sleepy, so tired, I can't move, I don't want to move, so tired so tired so tired I can't keep my eyes open—

"Will."

Will was struck by a sudden burst of energy that contradicted the sluggishness from before. He opened his eyes.

He was sitting this time, planted in the chair across from the fireplace once more. Hannibal sat next to him, smiling gently at him.

"Good to see you again." He offered his hand, which Will shook. "Did you have a slightly easier time getting here?"

Will took a second to find himself, rubbing his temples. Everything had come rushing at him so suddenly, and now he had to make sense of the cushion of the chair against his thighs and back, the pattering of the rain, the ornate details of the palace. "Only slightly."

"Well, it's something."

"So yesterday wasn't a fluke." Hannibal had started a fire, and Will watched the flames flicker. "This is really how your mind works."

"Yes. And you're my guest. It's only fair I treat you with hospitality." He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. His face appeared even more shadowed from the firelight. "Now, I have a really important question for you, Will. It could make or break our relationship, I believe."

Will's heart began to pound, but he tried his best to maintain composure in front of the doctor. He couldn't show weakness. "Alright."

Hannibal paused, reaching for the small side table between their chairs. He opened the top drawer and pulled out two wine glasses, fingers laced artfully to hold them both in an X shape. "Red or white?" He said, setting both glasses down on the surface.

Will couldn't hold back his smirk of relief. It was likely not a test of his character, but a test of how truthful he could be. Of how refined his tastes really were. "Is it a good idea to drink here?"

"Oh, it's all for aesthetic purposes. You'll taste it, but you won't feel it. Just adds to the mood."

"Well...depends on who's buying. If it's me, then I don't really get to have the wine I like the most."

"Say it's a millionaire. A millionaire who can conjure anything in the world, whenever he wants, for free, and he's currently under suspicion for murder." He gave Will a knowing glance. "And you're in his home. If he was buying, what would you take?"

Will avoided his gaze, considering his answer. "Very deep reds," he replied. "Like Cabernet Sauvignon. Or Syrah."

Hannibal hummed in approval. "Lovely." Will looked over to see him smile, a playful glint in his brown eyes. "Enjoy."

When Will looked back at the glass, it was full of dark red wine. His shoulders tensed.

"This is wild." He reluctantly reached for the glass, to which Hannibal did the same and offered a cheers. Their glasses clinked together, the small vibrations of the collision running down to Will's fingers. He tipped it to his lips and swallowed a delicious and rich Cabernet.

Hannibal swallowed his own sip. His pronounced Adam's apple bobbed. "I know it's easy to forget, but none of this is real, Will. The wine glasses," he held his up, and Will watched it disappear suddenly from his hand, "the fire," this vanished as well, "the chairs, the rain, the walls and the floor and the ceiling..." Every item slipped away as he spoke its name, eventually turning the entire room into a void of black. They weren't anywhere anymore.

"None of it is real." Hannibal's voice echoed in this new place, and Will felt a chill down his spine. It was so isolated and cold now. "It's all in my imagination."

Will swallowed to stop his voice from shaking. "But it's real enough to you."

Hannibal smiled. "But it's real enough to me."

In one blink, they were back inside the palace, sitting in their chairs and staring at the fire as if nothing happened. The taste of the wine returned to linger in Will's mouth. He took another sip.

"You promised to show me relevant memories, Doctor," he said. "Will you do that for me today?"

"I will. But I feel you should know something first." He swirled the wine around in his glass and watched it intently. "I'm not actively attempting to frustrate you out there. In the real world. The silence is not something that I'm doing out of malice." He sighed. "You can choose to believe me, or you can write me off. It's your decision."

"Then what is it? Are you afraid?"

"I think anyone in my place would be. But specifically, I have an anxious disorder. Selective mutism." He blushed. "It makes speaking incredibly difficult when I'm in stressful situations. I want to speak to you, but I can't. The words are lodged in there, and when I think about expressing them I feel like I'm going to faint."

Will softened. He wasn't sure he if believed it or not, but he could at least pretend to. That would probably lead to a better outcome. "I see. Thank you for telling me that."

"It's a result of a lot of trauma from childhood. That's all I'm going to say on it, as none of it is relevant and none of it is your business. Not to be crass, but that's the way it is."

"Of course. If it's not relevant, then it's not my problem."

"Right." Hannibal nodded, satisfied. "I would like to know what you do consider relevant, though. What is it that you're wanting to see? What memories will help you out the most?"

"I suppose anything related to your activities on the night of each crime. But there's so many at this point that I'm not sure where to start. And no one told me I'd have to remember each date." He gave Hannibal a smug look. "Since you've got everything so organized."

"I have an idea, then." Hannibal got up from his chair. "For tomorrow, you write the important dates on your hand. They should travel here with you. Then I'll be able to tell you everything I remember. For today, I'll show you something different."

"No, wait." Will stayed where he was, trying to keep some semblance of power by refusing to blindly follow along. "I want to know something."

"...Okay."

"I don't remember dates, but I can remember names. And I want to know what the name Jeremy Olmstead means to you."

Hannibal clearly wasn't expecting this, and his shoulders tensed. "He's one of the victims, yes?"

"You know who he is." It wasn't a question. He wanted to see how much Hannibal would reveal on his own.

"I do." Hannibal never moved to sit back down, instead resting his hand on the back of Will's chair. "In fact, I'll show you how. If you wish."

"I do." Will, satisfied that he had skewed the conversation in the right direction, followed him into the hallway.

The door they went to resembled those of an emergency room, white with a slit down the middle and easy to flap open from both sides. Hannibal pushed both the left and right sides open, and they both stepped into a blinding light.

Will blinked as the scene came into focus. He was viewing a white hospital room, and there was a man in the bed groaning and writhing in pain. In the memory, Hannibal turned to look at the man's face, and Will recognized it to be that of Jeremy Olmstead, the eighth and most recent victim of the Chesapeake Ripper.

"What the hell is this?" He asked.

"Jeremy got into a hunting accident years ago. I only remember because I thought his face seemed familiar when I saw the news. It was a serious case — one that's always in the back of your mind. It emerged after hearing of his death."

Will winced at the sight of Jeremy's mangled leg, which had clearly sustained some damage from the discarded arrow on the hospital floor. The memory was merely a montage of Hannibal's actions, passing around tools and doing minor cleanup. He never operated on the man.

"He wasn't in my area of the hospital. I was there to spectate and to analyze the wound, not fix it." The colors of the memory began to dull until they had all seeped away, and the vision went still. "That's the crux of that memory."

It explained Hannibal's reaction to hearing the name, but to Will that wasn't enough. "Olmstead was found with tools piercing nearly every part of his body. If you looked down on him from above, he resembled an infamous surgical portrait." He took a step closer. "I'm sure you've heard of the Wound Man, Doctor?"

To his left there was a flash, and when he looked there was a vision of that very portrait floating before them. Hannibal was remembering it in meticulous detail, it seemed, and

judging by his expression he wasn't expecting it to be here.

"Well, it looks like I have. But even if that hadn't showed up, of course I'm familiar with the concept. Surgeons must be."

"Yes. And Chilton isn't a surgeon, nor has he ever been. You were." Will walked out of the memory doors, preferring the light and more realistic new of the hallway. This time, it was Hannibal who followed. "How would someone like Chilton know how to recreate this image perfectly? Someone who isn't anywhere near that profession and, to be frank, is nowhere near that precise and articulate in his manner?"

Hannibal was silent for a long moment. "I am still under the impression that Chilton is framing me. If he wanted it to look like my work, then he would make a portrait like that. He would point the compass towards me and away from him. You would be giving him the exact reaction that he wants."

"That's all hypothetical, Doctor. Do you really think someone like Chilton would go through all this effort to frame you? Seems like a lot of effort."

"And it would also be a lot of effort for me to frame Chilton." Hannibal started walking. Will scowled at his back, knowing there was no other choice but to follow. Every move was a constant struggle for power, to take the lead in this conversation. "It's a cycle."

"His liver and thymus were removed. We found both of those things in your fridge, and they're matched to Jeremy."

"And you have no evidence I put those there." Hannibal kept his expression neutral. "Chilton could have done it to pin the blame on me."

"And how would he have known the exact moment that we would come around? How would he know that you wouldn't open your fridge and find it before we did?"

"You're forgetting that Chilton works with Jack Crawford." Hannibal glanced over at him. "His patients are often the product of FBI busting. He may have information. He may have realized when Jack started to get a tad more distant."

"Sure, let's say all of that is true. But let's talk about ice crystals." They reached the main foyer again, but instead of sitting down, Hannibal instead went to the harpsichord. He plucked out a few notes, unbothered. "The human meat found in your freezer had accumulated much thicker and more prominent ice crystals on and inside the bags. It's the kind of freezer mark that's more consistent with weeks or even months of storage. Chilton's seemed a lot younger. More color, thinner crystals. You understand what I'm getting at."

"I do. But Chilton could have taken the older meat from his freezer and put it into mine. Really, this is all circumstantial, Will. You knew that already. Isn't that why we're here, and not out there? Why I'm not in court yet?"

"There's only so far that coincidence and guessing can get you."

"Of course. But I wish you would apply some to Chilton, as well."

Will opened his mouth to speak, but he was cut off by the sound of something cracking. It was like a fissure had formed between this world and another. He looked down at the floor, wondering if it had cracked underneath him, and realized that his feet were disappearing out from under him.

"Looks like it's time for you to wake up." Hannibal observed the effects with intrigue. "It's a shame. I like having you here."

Before Will could answer, he was gone.

VI — The Missing

April 5, 2030

Jack Crawford was in an even worse mood than he normally was. When Will walked into his office for the first time in a few days, having been taken away from HQ thanks to the week's events, he found the man muttering to himself and clenching his hands into fists. Will was pretty sure he could see a tear dripping from his cheek down onto the dark oak desk.

"...Jack?" He said gently, knocking on the open door. "You want me to come in?"

"We need to go. Now." Jack wiped his face with his broad hands and looked up with hatred in his eyes. "That motherfucker needs to talk. I don't care if we have to torture him."

"Hold on, Jack." Will chased after him. Jack's long strides and fast pace made that difficult. "You can't torture him."

"Mentally, I can. And that's what I'm gonna do," he growled. "You can't kidnap one of my own and get away with it."

Miriam Lass had been missing for two years, having disappeared without a trace one day while investigating the same case that Will was investigating now. Jack had put her on the case as a strapping young student. She was hopeful to advance quickly in the field, and she was able to sweet-talk Crawford into giving her a try. The two of them were friendly, in a mentor-student sort of way.

She'd gone on a quest to find the Chesapeake Ripper and impress Jack Crawford, and instead she'd vanished for two years. Now, however, she'd emerged; or, her body had. Jack had spent the earlier part of the week examining one of the more recent leads — data had finally come back on some of the tree bark that had been used in the Ripper's mural of Sheldon Isley. It led Jack to a cabin, whereupon digging into the basement he found the emaciated, weak body of Miriam Lass. She'd died of dehydration only days after both Hannibal and Chilton were arrested, according to the coroner.

"One of them kept her in a fucking pit for two years, torturing her, and then she died a slow and painful death. God knows what she would have been like if she'd lived. One of them did this to her, and whoever did is going to pay."

"I get it, Jack. It's a tragedy. I really wish things had been different. But all this is going to do is get you in trouble and increase sympathy for Doctor Lecter. That's not what you want, right?"

Jack was breathing heavily like a bull. "She still had every organ, Will. Every limb. This motherfucker did this just for fun. Starved her and tortured her because he felt like it. Hell, he probably fed her human meat for fun."

"We don't know for sure that it's Hannibal. It could be Chilton. Or someone else entirely."

"She was dehydrated right after both of them were arrested. Whoever knew where she was, whoever was keeping her, wasn't around to give her the water she needed. The timing is too convenient. It has to be one of them."

"I'll talk to Hannibal. We'll get this figured out."

"Oh, yeah, you'll talk to him. And, what, he's just gonna hand all the evidence right over to you? 'Oh, of course, here's what I really did. Now put me in jail for life!' That's fucking stupid, Will!" Jack yelled, and his voice echoed through the hallway. Will stood there and took it, unwilling to defy him too openly. He waited for his boss to calm down before speaking.

"Talking to me like that isn't going to get us anywhere," he said. "I know you're upset. I'm sorry. It's a damn shame what happened to her, and I know you feel guilty for sending her out there. But that's not going to help us."

Jack closed his eyes, tension still simmering underneath. "They're going to let them both go."

"Letting—"

"Chilton and Hannibal. Releasing them. Lack of evidence."

"Holy shit. You're kidding."

"No. Everything is circumstantial. Both of them have someone posting bail, so the FBI is going to let them go. We don't have enough to keep them for this long without a trial. They're going to be on probation and house arrest, given the severity of the charges, and they'll be under constant watch. Weapons removed from the house, sharp objects, that kind of thing."

"Even though one of them is a serial killer."

"Yes."

They stood in silence for a moment, both of them clearly made stunned by the idea. Will sighed. "Do you think this could get Hannibal to talk?"

"That's what I'm wondering. Hoping. We're trying the LOOM again today, and then we're probably going to have to bring him over here frequently to talk. That, or we'll use the portables."

"Portables?"

"The LOOM has portable versions, without all the restraints. It's a little worse since we have to crowd around a tablet to watch the brain waves, but we can figure it out. Our dream is that he'll talk normally, though." Jack studied him. "Honestly, Will: do you think it's Hannibal?"

"I do." Will didn't have to think much on it. "Chilton has spent this entire time whining or crying like a baby over how scared he is. Hannibal hasn't budged. He's stoic. When I'm in there with him, it's like he doesn't give a shit about what's happening."

"So you're really having conversations with him? No dreams, no memories?"

"I only see the memories he wants me to see. And that's what's so difficult. Obviously he's not going to show me the important ones. The incriminating ones."

"Maybe we need to up the sedation. Let's see how today goes normally, though."

"Got it."

They continued towards the lab, and Will was left without an apology for Jack's outburst. He brushed it off, though — he'd come to learn that Jack was simply like that.

"Welcome back. It's been a few days."

Hannibal was already nursing a glass of wine, another deep red. He caught Will looking and gestured to the table.

"It's a Syrah this time. Marvelous."

Potentially dozens murdered, and he cared about his wine. "Hannibal." Will leaned forward. "We need to cut this out. I don't think you understand the gravity of the situation you're in."

"My lawyer says I may be going home. It's made my mood a little brighter." He smirked.

"Do you know what we found yesterday?"

"I don't."

"We found the dead body of Miriam Lass. Nearly naked and left to die at the bottom of an abandoned well, with no water or food. Nothing. Her name was Miriam Lass, Hannibal. Tell me honestly what that name means to you. I'm not taking this anymore."

"Taking what?"

He stood. "You might think that you can lounge around in your little mansion and drink wine for the rest of your life while families suffer, but if you don't end up telling the truth then the world is going to make their own decision. All this evidence is already out to the public. They know you have human meat in your fridge. Even if it's not yours, and we discover that, do you really think that everyone in the world is going to view you the same?"

Will spread his arms, gesturing to their surroundings. "I don't have to know you all that well to realize what kind of person you are. I see all this, your dream world, and I realize that you're afraid of indignity. You're afraid of your status lowering. And, trust me, it's already lowered. It's your choice now — do you want to be the killer who confesses and does his due time, or do you want to be the bastard who lies and gets away with it the rest of his life? Because people prefer one over the other, Doctor. You're right in the fact that you're the one in control." Will stepped closer and pointed a finger at him. "You control the narrative. Can you do the world, and yourself, a favor by making it a good one?"

Hannibal merely took another sip of his wine. He swallowed it slowly, little by little, and Will's anger began to boil even further. When Hannibal was finished, he shook his head. "I didn't kill any of those people," he said. "I didn't hurt anyone."

"Then tell me who did."

"Chilton."

"See, we don't think that's the case." Will pressed his lips together, thinking. If he could get away with a bluff, then he would have Hannibal right where he wanted him. "You know we've been using the LOOM on Chilton, as well. And his thoughts are a lot more comprehensible than yours."

This wasn't the case. Chilton was talking enough to make using the LOOM unnecessary. He was annoying, a pretty big prick, but at least he was talking. Will continued on anyway.

"We've found memories of interactions between the two of you, and in every one of them, Chilton is clearly afraid of you. You can almost smell it. He thinks there's something off about you, and he has for a while. But he couldn't put his finger on it."

Hannibal narrowed his eyes, clearly looking for a sign of dishonesty. "Well, I don't think highly of him, either. Never did. I'm sure you understand why."

"He's an asshole."

Surprised, Hannibal let out a little chuckle. "Yes."

"Quite frankly, though, I'm thinking the same thing about you." Will crossed his arms. "You're pretentious. Spoiled. And your stubbornness to keep secrets from me isn't helping. You can do magic tricks in your head all you want, but I don't find you all that interesting, Hannibal."

Hannibal looked away, scoffing. "You will."

"Maybe if you'd show me something of substance." He lunged to get to the point, knowing he'd hit a weak spot in Hannibal's ego. "I want to know about Miriam Lass."

"I can show you one thing. But, as you said, I don't have anything interesting." He got up. "She came to see me once."

He was right. The memory was bland; Miriam entered his office with curious eyes, and they spoke about Jeremy Olmstead's murder for a moment. Hannibal remembered having him as a patient, and he climbed the ladder to the upstairs portion of his office to grab his notes about the ordeal. From there, he merely watched her from above before turning to grab the books from the shelf.

The memory froze there, all of the colors turning grey. Will didn't move, however.

"It's not over yet," he said.

"It is over. That's all I remember of the ordeal."

"See, I don't think it is." Will stuck his hands in his pockets, planting his feet firmly in place. "And I'm not stepping away until I see her leave your office. Show me the part where she leaves safely, and maybe then I'll believe you."

"I can't show you something that I don't remember happening." Will's defiance didn't seem to faze him. "I'm sure it was just as uneventful as this was."

"You conveniently forgot the ending? You can't remember a moment where you gave her the notes? Where she told you if they were helpful or not?"

"It's not like that. You're being ridiculous."

Will, drawn in by morbid curiosity, began to walk forward. He ignored Hannibal's questions, feeling himself get even closer to the memory with every step. One step, and he could feel the wood under his feet. Another, and he could feel the air conditioner rustling the hair on the nape of his neck. Colors came rushing back into the vision, and in one more step Will was engulfed by it completely.

Will was alone now. Hannibal wasn't there to watch him from the doorway, because there was no doorway anymore. He was in the office. He was Hannibal. The scent of oak, the shine of the polished banister, every sense registered with him as if he had taken over Hannibal's life. He had inhabited the man's body.

The body that was now beginning to move. Will must have been a bystander, then, feeling everything Hannibal felt but unable to completely control him. He could only sit back and watch, analyze his movements like he used to do at every crime scene. He could profile.

The last thing he expected Hannibal to do was take off his shoes, but he did. Slipping off the loafers and leaving him in socked feet, Hannibal slowly crept around to the other end of the banister. This time, Miriam had her back to him, and she was engrossed in some papers on his desk. Will felt a twinge of anger in Hannibal's brain — she's not supposed to be snooping through those — and then that feeling turned to dread when she froze at one of the papers. From up here, Will could only see a rough sketch of a person, but Hannibal seemed to know what it was. His body moved swiftly towards the other ladder, silently climbing down each rung with masterful precision. He made no noise at all.

He quickly snuck up behind Miriam and lunged at her, tightly wrapping his arm around her throat.

She gasped, clawing at Hannibal's sleeve and kicking, but Hannibal had her off of the ground now. Will felt the muscles in his arm flexing with all their might, her neck firmly secured in the crook of his elbow. She struggled, but it wasn't enough. It wasn't long before her body started to become weaker.

The worst part about it was hearing Hannibal's thoughts as he went about this. Will could feel them in his own head as clear as day, and there was not a single shred of remorse. The only thing he could think was that she knows too much. She knows too much.

When she fell limp, Hannibal let go of her. She flopped to the floor, her body unconsciously gasping in air. Hannibal looked down at her, considering his options — Will felt them float by, one by one — and eventually a chilling thought passed through. Why not?

Hannibal scooped her up and snuck out of his office the back way.

Will couldn't bear to see what he was going to do with her next — it didn't matter. She was already dead. There was nothing he could do, and that was clear enough evidence that Hannibal was the culprit. He'd done all of it. He'd seen the drawing that Miriam was fixated on: it was a sketch of the Wound Man, the inspiration for Jeremy's mural.

He tore himself away from the memory; it was just as difficult as pulling his skin away from a glue trap. He stumbled out of the vision, falling onto his knees in front of Hannibal. He was back in the palace, back in front of this murderer.

The expression on Hannibal's face was something Will had never seen on him before. It was a mixture of anger, betrayal, and bewildered fear. He stared at Will, unmoving.

Of course, that was the very moment that the LOOM decided to wake them up.

VII - The Deal

"Stay where you are. Both of you stay right where you are!" The orders rang harshly throughout the room, immediately jolting Will out of his groggy state. He looked around the room, watching a nurse frantically approach him and then slip off his helmet. Hannibal was kept in place, still hazy and half-asleep.

The nurse escorted him out of the room, and Will felt a large weight lift off of his shoulders. He'd done it. He'd found the answer, right there in Hannibal's mind, and now he was going to put the culprit in jail. The process had actually been a success. The LOOM worked, as much as Hannibal didn't want it to.

He was brought into the back room this time, behind the glass that allowed the observers to watch them both. Screens surrounded them on all sides, and the scientists were working to shut them off one by one. Will glanced at the screen that held Hannibal's brain waves; he wasn't knowledgeable enough to decipher what they meant, but it was interesting to get another perspective on his mind.

"We got him, Jack," Will blurted. "I saw something. I saw what he did to Miriam."

"Hold that thought." Jack took him by the sleeve and led him away from prying ears. They walked all the way to the end of the hallway, towards the men's room, and once they were inside Jack slumped against the wall.

"I saw a memory of him kidnapping Miriam. He snuck up behind her and strangled her unconscious, and—"

"I got a call from the lab while you were under, Will." Jack rubbed his temple. "They found skin cells all over Miriam's body and the crime scene. And they're a match to Chilton."

Stupefied, Will stammered out a few incomprehensible words before clearing his throat. "Hold on. Chilton? But I saw...he had a vivid flashback. A memory. He told me himself that

it was a memory, and he tried to let me see only half of it. But I broke the rules somehow, and I was able to see the rest of it."

"You're not making sense. You're telling me he showed you this memory? Voluntarily?"

"He showed me the memory, yeah. He can access all of his memories behind these doors in his mind. He tried to act like he only remembered the first half of her visit to his office, and that the memory was over. But then I kept walking closer, and I was able to see the rest of it. He strangled her. He carried her away."

"She visited his office?" Jack swore. "That could be one of the last places she was seen. He knew she was missing, and he didn't say a word."

"Because he took her."

"Then explain Chilton's DNA. I would have believed it was Hannibal fifteen minutes ago, but now I'm not so sure."

"He could have easily planted that DNA."

"There was a whole lot of it. Natural skin deposits and cell shedding consistent with the recent handling of her body. It couldn't have been him just sprinkling some skin cells onto her."

"No, it couldn't, because he's smarter than that. Jack, I'm telling you, I saw him do this. I felt him do this. It was like I was inside his body, reliving every second. It was horrifyingly detailed."

"Will, I get it. I believe you. But we don't know for sure that this was a true memory. Were you able to speak with him at all after it happened?"

"No. We woke up right after." He remembered the look on Hannibal's face. "I just know he looked upset."

"Then we can't be sure that it was a true flashback. It could have been you projecting what you wanted to see. It could have been anything. And, if you consider a court hearing, LOOM evidence is still inadmissible. It's worse than a lie detector right now. Jury would much rather have DNA over something like this. All signs are pointing to Chilton."

"Chilton is never going to confess. He's going to keep claiming Hannibal did it."

"Let him. I don't care."

"But he did do it. Hannibal is the one who did this, I swear to you. I can feel it." Will was desperate now, not just for the greater good but also for his own safety; if Hannibal was let go, and he knew that Will had found out too much, there was no telling what it would do to silence him. "You can't just write this off."

"We're gonna use it. We're going to interrogate him with it. But if we can't get anything good out of it, then we're probably going to have no choice but to let him go. LOOM evidence is so floppy and fragile that we can't hold anyone on it, and that alone against Chilton's DNA would be a failure in court. It hurts me too, trust me. I want to find justice for Miriam just as much as you do, if not way more."

"I'm a liability to Hannibal now," Will hissed. "I know too much. He could come after me."

"If we let him go, we'd still keep him under close watch. If he tried anything, we would be right on it."

"I wouldn't put it past him to be able to sneak away."

Jack sighed. "Okay, then we'll have some men watch your place, too. And you have a gun on hand, right? You should."

"I do." Will held back the thought that rushed through his head in that moment, the thought that if Hannibal showed up to his home, a simple gun wasn't going to be enough to kill him. It was ridiculous, but that primal fear was still there.

"And this should make you feel better." Jack reached into his pocket and pulled out an envelope, marked only with Will's name. It was thin and light, and Will could vaguely see the blue check through the outer layer of paper. His eyes widened.

"This is it?"

"That's it." Jack looked resigned. "Seventy-five thousand dollars, made out to Mr. Will Graham. Sorry it took me a minute. I had to pull it out little by little so no one would notice."

"I…wow. Thank you, Jack." He'd nearly forgotten about the money in all of the chaos — nearly. "You have no idea how much this is gonna help us out."

"And you've helped us out a lot. I just wish we didn't have this conflicting evidence."

"I'll keep doing it. I'll gladly keep going in there if it means we can find the truth."

"There's no point. We have the evidence, technically, but even if we got more none of it would be usable. We have to go off of the concrete evidence, which is Chilton's DNA. That's hard to pass off, Will."

"Hannibal framed him. I just know it. With the way he's acting, there's no way he didn't." He kept his voice low, as if Hannibal could hear through the multiple walls. "He's completely detached, no remorse, no fear over all of this. He acts so suspicious."

"There's nothing I can do, Will. I'm sorry." Jack looked away, clearly distraught by his own helplessness as well. "I promise, we'll have people keeping an eye on you and him. You don't

have anything to worry about."

Will wasn't so sure about that. He decided that the first thing he was going to spend this new money on was a security system for his home. It felt like the safest option.

Well, maybe it was the second thing he would buy. He wanted to get his wife flowers first.

April 9, 2030

Hannibal Lecter was released on probation two days after Will learned the truth about him. A serial killer, a kidnapper, a cannibal, was let out onto the streets, and Will watched it happen. The police cars around both of their neighborhoods didn't matter — he was still a loose cannon, possibly ready to strike Will at any moment for knowing too much. It was a horrifying thought, and it had left Will unable to sleep for the following nights.

That's why he decided to do what he did.

Finding Hannibal's address wasn't hard, especially when police cars were driving there and back every day to trade shifts. He'd overheard one officer talking to a supervisor, who'd instructed him to take over on Lecter surveillance; following that police car from there was easy. He'd stayed a few cars behind, driving past and far away once the police car came to a stop. It was a huge house, almost a mansion, and Will felt a twinge of hatred.

Contacting Hannibal was slightly more difficult. He couldn't just walk up to the front door, since the officers would see him. Instead, he had to take note of where the men were stationed, watching for gaps in their vision. There was a door off of one of the rooms that led to a back porch, and the nearest officer from there was stationed by the backyard gate. He could see if Hannibal exited that gate, but not anything inside of the yard. Will decided the best course of action was to climb the fence and enter in through that door. It left the least amount of risk.

So, at around midnight, he leapt over the fence to Hannibal's backyard, approached the screen glass door, and raised his hand to knock.

He wasn't sure that Hannibal would be awake, but to his surprise, he showed up at the door rather quickly. Shocked to see Will, he hesitated before sliding it open.

"Will? Are—"

"I have a proposition for you."

Hannibal looked him up and down, taking in the all black clothing, hat, and lack of glasses. He'd done his best to conceal his identity from afar. After a second to think, Hannibal stepped aside. "Please."

Will entered. Hannibal was in more suitable clothing for his aesthetics now: a maroon button-down with the sleeves rolled up to the elbows and black dress pants. His forearms were tan and muscular, strung with veins. "I've been thinking of you, Will," he said. "It's a coincidence you show up now."

"Thinking about what happened the other day?" Will glanced at him while he set his duffel bag down. "Because I have, too."

"Do you have a weapon? What's in there?"

"No weapons. No wire. Nothing. I'm here on my own — I clearly snuck over here, or I would have just gone to the front."

"…Can you reassure me you don't have a wire?"

Will began to unbutton his shirt without hesitation. He felt no shame around Hannibal now; they had both been in a rather strange situation that required multiple suspensions of

disbelief. They'd both seen weirder. Hannibal stammered something, clearly surprised, but he didn't stop him.

He didn't bother undoing more than the first few buttons, showing Hannibal his bare chest. Hannibal looked down at his scars.

"You're…"

"My boss at the time thought I was getting a cyst removed. Little did he know, I was actually removing the cis." Will shrugged. "Those language barriers will get you."

Hannibal's lips turned up slightly. "I won't make you remove any more clothing, don't worry. I suppose I'm just…curious as to why you're here."

"I'm here to talk. And there's some things I want from you."

"Are you wanting to talk about what you saw?"

Will started buttoning himself up again. "Am I going to be the next Miriam Lass, Doctor Lecter?"

Hannibal blinked. "As in?"

"Are you going to silence me because I found out too much about you? About what you are?"

"Do you want the honest answer?"

"Of course."

“I’m not too sure just yet.”

“Well, maybe this will help.” Will knelt down next to his bag. “I did something last night. Something that could get me in a lot of trouble, as well.”

He reached in and pulled out one of the white helmets. It was part of a portable LOOM set, swiped from Quantico only last night. Yesterday, he’d purposefully swiped some notes from Jack’s pile in the lab and ensured they were left inside. When Jack realized he’d left them there, Will offered to go get them — and just like that, he was handed the keys. He got into the lab and took the papers, and he also stuffed one of the LOOM sets into a duffel bag he’d shoved into the closet the previous day. The duffel went into his office, the keys and papers went back to Jack, and no one suspected him. He was lucky that there were no security cameras in the lab; it was a waste of valuable energy that the room needed for the process.

“You stole those? What’s the purpose of that?”

“I committed a fatal flaw the other day, Doctor.” Will sat back on the floor, feigning a nonchalant dominance. “I found you interesting. Your thought process through it all was…it was fascinating. And how calm you were. Quite frankly, I…I wanted to see more.”

Hannibal watched him curiously.

“Your mind itself is already a captivating place. You’ve wormed your way into my head, too.” Will avoided his gaze. “And I want to look around some more. If you would let me.”

“You want more evidence for my crimes.”

“That’s my proposition.” He stood. “I want to look around your head some more. I want to spend more time there, learn about who you are. Learn the kind of person you used to be. And I also want you to leave me and my family completely alone. No stalking, no harm, no sending out hits. You leave us alone and let us be safe.”

“And what’s in it for me?”

“I won’t say a word to the FBI about what I see in there. You’ll get away with all of it.”

They stared into each other’s eyes for a while, and Will hoped with all of his might that Hannibal couldn’t see the cracks forming in his composure. Truthfully, of course he wasn’t going to let Hannibal get away. He was going to build up evidence, perhaps get clues on where to explore, and then he was going to give the police all the details when they came together. All he needed was one piece of concrete evidence, and Hannibal would be behind bars before he could even think of hurting Will or his family.

Of course, that was if Hannibal chose to leave them alone up until that point. The promise could be broken at any time. He would have to trust that Hannibal was a man of his word.

“I’m still lost on why you want to look into my head. What is it that intrigues you so much?”

For this, Will could tell the truth. Hannibal was probably the only person he could say this to. “You remind me of the person I want to be,” he said. “The way you embrace yourself, the way that you commit such horrific flaws in the eyes of society and yet still live a life of luxury in your mind. You don’t torture yourself. I’m not sure you’re even capable of that.”

“You want to embrace yourself?”

“I think I’ve lost myself. And I’m wondering if you can show me how to find him.”

Hannibal, although it was minuscule, softened at this. “I hope I can. Genuinely.”

Will raised an eyebrow. “So you want to do it?”

“I’ll do it, yes. If it ensures my safety, I’ll ensure yours.”

“It’s a deal, then.” Will held out his hand.

Hannibal shook.

VIII — The Butcher

April 9, 2030

"Where have you been?"

Molly's tone made it clear to Will that he wasn't going to get away from this conversation. When he entered their bedroom quietly after his visit to Doctor Lecter, he turned to find her sitting on the edge of the bed, glaring at him in her sweatpants and T-shirt. He was sure that his tiptoeing looked ridiculous to her.

Luckily, he'd been ready for this. "I had to go for a drive," he said. "I just...I couldn't get to sleep. Couldn't lay still."

"You can't do that to me, Will." Molly uttered through clenched teeth. "Someone potentially dangerous just got let out of jail, and you disappear on me? Even if it's just for an hour, you can't do that to me!"

If only she knew. "Shit. Yeah, I didn't even think about that. I'm sorry, honey. Really, I'm sorry." He went up to her and wrapped his arms around her slouched body. Despite everything, she softened. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"Answer your phone next time. Quit silencing it."

"I promise." He kissed her cheek. "But, Mol, things might be a little different until we're done analyzing all of the evidence. God knows how long they'll keep me there every day."

"You're just going to leave us alone every night?"

"I'm going to work only on the condition that an officer is stationed right outside. And I'll still be getting paid for overtime." Plus, I'll be exactly where the murderer is, so you don't have to worry about that.

"Do you think they let the wrong guy go, Will? Be honest. And don't worry about not scaring me," she said when he opened his mouth to object.

Will shed his jacket and lay back on the pillows. "...Yeah. Yeah, I think that Hannibal is the culprit."

"And they let him out."

"He's under surveillance, and you will be, too. All I'm going to do while I'm at work is try to prove that he's the killer. I refuse to do anything else."

"How are you going to do that?"

"I'll just have to closely analyze the evidence. Surely there's got to be one screw-up, or one crime scene that reflects his identity much better than Chilton's. Surely there's something in his home that we're missing."

"I damn well hope so."

"I'll keep you safe. Both of you." He couldn't bring his lips to form a promise. He wasn't sure if he'd be able to keep it.

And he definitely couldn't ensure that he was going to be kept safe.

April 10, 2030

"How does the portable one differ?"

Will fumbled with one of the helmets on Hannibal's couch. It felt odd to be sitting here conversing with the enemy so casually. The enemy himself was sitting at the opposite end, as far away as possible, his back straight in perfect posture as he watched Will intensely.

"Well, for full transparency, it's a little more dangerous. We can't monitor our brain waves. If something goes wrong, we won't know until it's too late. The device knows to wake you up when you're having a seizure or something, but there aren't any doctors to stop the process before the seizure happens, if that makes sense."

"So we could get ourselves into some danger."

"Yes. But, if this will make you feel better," he looked up. "If something happens, and I wake up to find you incapacitated in some way, I swear to you I'll either protect you or get help. Depends on the severity."

Hannibal didn't seem to catch the lie; if he did, he didn't show it. "And I'll do the same for you. I promise."

They nodded at each other. Will couldn't catch a lie in that — either it was the truth, or Hannibal was an expert in falsehoods. Either could be true.

"So the way these work. We put the helmets on and relax, and then each of us has to press the button on our remote." He held up his remote, equipped with only a small red button. Hannibal's was blue. "It has to be at the same time, or the helmets don't turn on. Stops nonconsensual stuff."

"Okay. And how do we wake up?"

"From what I've heard, you have to imagine yourself pushing the button again. You have to really want to wake up, and then you can visualize the button in your memory or dream. And you push it there. But these also automatically turn off after an hour, so it can't be that bad."

"Well, then, there's no need to waste time in there when we could do most of the talking here. We can reserve this only for the memories." Hannibal leaned back, crossing his legs. "Don't you agree?"

"Yeah. Yeah, that makes sense." Will mirrored him, and the handle of his pocketknife dug into his lower back. Just in case, he had it tucked away in his waistband, under the shirt and jacket. He glanced around the room. The house was vast yet cold, the kind of rich-people empty that was a house, not a home. It didn't feel lived in. "You have a very nice house."

"Thank you, but it's nothing compared to the palace." Hannibal smiled solemnly. "Nothing will ever compare."

"It really is beautiful in there. It reminds me of old Italian architecture."

"That's what I was going for. I based it off of my explorations in Florence. I worked in a museum that wasn't too far off from this."

"I worked in Italy for a few years. But that was about...seven years ago now, I guess. Wow."

"Really?" Hannibal brightened at this. "Where in Italy?"

"Rome was headquarters, but my force traveled to all kinds of cities. I've seen Florence."

"It's so beautiful, isn't it?" Hannibal shook his head in reverence. "Life-changing. I can't imagine why you'd want to leave."

"I could say the same for you."

"I found a research position at Georgetown. It felt right at the time. And I enjoy travel. I don't like too much of the same place."

"My job just wasn't right for me anymore." Will shrugged. "I get it. It felt right for me to come back here." He decided not to disclose his panic attack; it was too vulnerable. "Wouldn't be who I am now without that time there, though."

"Oh, certainly." Hannibal nodded in agreement.

"Did you...I mean, were you doing..." Will trailed off. He didn't want to be too blunt or insult Hannibal. God knows what he would do.

But Hannibal did the job for him. "Did I kill anyone there? Is that what you're asking?"

"...I suppose so, yeah."

"Do I really have your word on our deal?"

"If anyone found out I was doing this, I would be fired immediately."

"As of right now, I feel like you wouldn't mind getting fired if it meant you had a confession from me." Hannibal had already checked him for a wire again today, before they'd started, but he was still very skeptical.

"Well...LOOM evidence isn't admissible." Will held up the helmet. "If you'd rather show me there."

Hannibal slowly reached for his helmet. Silently, the two put in their earplugs and got into the right sitting position. Hannibal held out his remote between them, and Will did the same so they were right next to each other. Their knuckles brushed, and Will had to stop himself from flinching.

"Are we on three?" Hannibal teased.

"Why not."

They counted, and their thumbs simultaneously came down onto the buttons.

The transport was a lot rougher this time. It sent a rush of freezing air through Will, like his blood was flowing out through his feet and deep into the earth. He felt a jolt, and without the sedatives it was harder to relax into things. He felt the confusion and the fear that came with this unnatural process, and it built up all the way until his world went black.

The palace swam into view through an underwater camera, little by little. Will swayed with the current and closed his eyes until things became more steady, and when he opened them he was laying on the floor of the palace hallway. Hannibal was nearby, too, watching him from above.

"That can't be comfortable," he said.

"That was really rough." Will rubbed his forehead before slowly sitting up. "That sucked."

"It's better with the sedatives, I bet. I should have Valium in the house somewhere for next time, if you'd like." He held out his hand to help Will off of the ground. Will accepted, but then he sensed Hannibal holding onto his hand for a beat too long. Both men seemed to notice then, and Hannibal let go.

"Show me something relevant?" Will requested.

"I'll allow you to walk in, like you did before with that trick. But I do not want you entering memories you don't have permission to enter. There are some that are simply off limits — even to me, at most times." Hannibal held onto the golden doorknob of an ornate wooden door. "Some things I prefer not to remember. I'm sure you have those."

"Don't we all."

The door creaked open, and Hannibal led them in.

The streets of Italy were unmistakable. There was something so much more magical about the nighttime air, the way the warm streetlights lit up the cobblestone and reflected off of the indigo water. The air smelled of salt and fresh fish, not in the unpleasant way. It was here that Hannibal was walking, his eyes firmly set on a young couple walking a few blocks ahead.

"I'll spare you the details. The aftermath is what matters." Hannibal quickly waved his hand in front of Will's face, and the image changed. Now, Hannibal was standing in a large kitchen. He was clutching a butcher knife that was soaked in blood and indistinguishable pink blobs.

"May I go in?" Will asked softly.

"Of course."

Will walked forward into the memory, entering the mind of the enemy. His vision merged with Hannibal's, and now he was the one holding the knife. At home, when Will would clutch any knife at all — gutting a fish, slicing vegetables for Molly, whittling — he would unintentionally squeeze it with white knuckles, making his fingers sore and stiff when he finally let go. It was as if he was trying to keep it in place, to stop it from gaining a mind of its own and doing terrible things in his own hand.

Now, he was holding the blade so loosely. So effortlessly. He rinsed it in the sink, watching the blood and tiny pieces of guts slip down the disposal, then he put it in the dishwasher.

He turned around. Near him, on a wooden cutting board, there was a thick piece of red meat. He knew without hesitation that it was human meat, and the thought merely washed over him. It was as mundane as remembering he had to mow the lawn or let the dogs out. Just a fact, not a feeling, floating by like every other basic thought.

It's chilly in here. This is human meat. I'll need to wash that suit well. This is human meat and I harvested it. I already cleaned the kitchen. I want to eat it.

So simple. So uncaring. Will — or Hannibal, whoever he was — handled the meat like he would a filet, wrapping it up in paper and placing it in the fridge.

He realized his neck was stinging. Bringing his fingers up to the spot, he felt three raised scratch marks blooming from the skin. It was from when she had fought back.

Wait, how did I know — God. I have to get out of here.

He ripped himself away from the memory, desperate to gain his morality back before he realized that losing it might not be that bad.

IX — The Dog

April 10, 2030

"Will?" Hannibal called after him as he stumbled out of the memory room, staggering past him into the hallway. "Was that too much for you? I didn't mean to show you anything you weren't ready for."

"You're..." A million possible words ran through Will's head. *You're fucked up. You're horrible. You're a monster. You're disgusting. What is wrong with you? What happened to you to make you like this?* He held it all back, not wanting to ruin the terse relationship that the two had.

He felt a mixture of horror and extreme fascination, the complete absence of guilt leaving him reeling. This was Hannibal's mind, sure, but Will had found some way to break the rules. He had somehow learned to dive deeper, to view memories and emotions that Hannibal didn't necessarily want him to see. If Hannibal did have any feelings of guilt, there was no way that he would be able to hide them, not with Will's new-found power of perception.

The most realistic option was that they simply weren't there. That part of Hannibal's brain was completely absent. He was as unacquainted with guilt as a deaf man with sound, a blind man with sight.

The scarier option was that those emotions were there, and Hannibal was capable of feeling them, but he'd learned long ago to erase them. He had become such an expert at avoiding guilt that it didn't even run through his head anymore.

No matter which one was true, Will knew that he had to get out of here.

"I want out," he said, trying to keep his voice as firm as possible. He didn't want to show any weakness in front of Hannibal, especially when he was in his territory.

"Are you feeling alright?"

"I'm fine. But I want out."

"...Alright." Hannibal raised his hands in front of him in surrender. "You're the one who told me how to get out. Don't we have to visualize the way out?"

"Yes, but you're the one who's better at visualizing than I am. Can you remember what the button looked like?"

Hannibal considered this for a moment. His left thumb ran idly in small circles as he thought. "Check your pockets," he finally said.

Will did. In his left pocket, he felt a lump; he pulled out a near exact replica of the buttons they had used to get themselves in here. It was wireless this time, a small grey rod with a red button on the top. Will pushed it, and in mere seconds he began to disappear. Both of the men were silent as his body slowly fizzled out, leaving Hannibal in the hallway alone.

Will surfaced before Hannibal did, and there was a brief moment when Will considered fleeing. Once again, though, he ignored his instincts, since doing so could jeopardize their deal. He would be damned if he put his family in danger just to get away from this one moment.

He decided to help Hannibal out, carefully taking off his helmet and removing his earplugs. His thumb brushed against Hannibal's hair, right above the ear, and his skin was warm. It was an almost shocking reminder that Hannibal was indeed human, someone he could touch.

As Hannibal woke, Will double checked the knife in his pocket. It was right where he left it, of course, but it felt good to remind himself that it was there for him to use.

Hannibal's almond-shaped eyes fluttered open, and they immediately shot to Will with an almost concerned glance. "That wasn't meant to upset you," he said. "You wished to know

what it was like."

Will merely shook his head. "I think I need to get home now," he said. "I don't want anyone to wonder where I am."

"Of course," Hannibal replied, although Will sensed a hint of sullenness in his voice. "Who do you live with?"

"Just some people I know." Will stood, maintaining nonchalance. "Easier on the bills."

"I see." Both of the men knew he was lying. Neither of them wanted to acknowledge it. "Well, be safe."

"Thank you." Will was already packing up the equipment.

"Will."

Will finally looked up at him.

"Will I see you again?"

Will blinked. "Yes. If not tomorrow, then the day after. You'll see me."

"Why?"

It wasn't the question he expected. He hoisted the bag onto his shoulder. "What I just saw intrigued me." And I need to collect as much evidence as possible. Maybe even a direct confession, if you get comfortable enough.

"In what way? Is it a morbid curiosity, like watching a disaster unfold that you can't look away from? Or is it something else?"

"It's watching a master perform his craft. Easily, and without fail."

Hannibal seemed equally intrigued by that answer. He stood alongside Will and escorted him to the door. "I'll see you next time, then. Think about what you want to see."

Will looked into his eyes. "I will."

When Will was ten years old, he nearly killed a boy for hurting his dog.

He'd been raised in the type of household where his father expected him to venture out after breakfast and be home by dinner. He often took a long walk alone in the woods, wanting to observe the birds and the nature around him. It was autumn, and the orange leaves crunched under his feet. He was content here.

He heard a group of kids shouting in the distance, their voices getting closer. This didn't concern Will immediately; he'd gotten good at evading other kids' attention by this point. No one tended to recognize him, since he was often quiet and refused to find close friends. He hardly knew the faces of anyone in his grade, let alone other grades, so when a trio of kids in the grade ahead came barreling from the trees, neither party acknowledged each other.

One boy was walking a dog on a leash, a golden retriever that was trotting far ahead and sniffing the ground. It was a beautiful dog, youthful and excited, and it kept getting distracted by random scents. The boy walking it must have been dealing with it for the entire journey, and he was getting very irritated very quickly. He tugged on the dog's leash tightly, and when that wasn't enough, he picked up a rock on the ground and threw it at the dog's back. It hit the dog, who let out a yelp before jumping away and dejectedly trudging back to the owner.

"Hey!" Will couldn't help himself. It wasn't like him to speak up, but he had to say something.

The group turned to face him as if noticing him for the first time. "What?"

"You can't hit your dog like that. You hurt it."

"It's just a dog. Doesn't feel anything."

Will scoffed. "Yes, it does. Obviously it does."

"What, can you talk to animals now? Don't be a baby." The boy rolled his eyes. "It's fine."

"You made it cry out. That means it was hurt." Hatred was slowly boiling inside of him.

"I just startled him. Look, he can totally take it." The boy pulled the dog closer by the leash and rammed his knee into its ribs, nearly knocking it over. The dog murmured a little bit, not nearly as loud as last time, but there was fear in its eyes now. It was clear that the animal was used to it.

Looking back on it, Will could hardly remember the moments when he flew into that rage. It was all a blur, and rather than visions, the sensations stuck with him. The feeling of his small knuckles scraping against the boy's new adult teeth, fabric between his fingers, wild growls lodged in his throat. Adrenaline as he wiped the blood from his upper lip and felt the screams of the other children muffled in his ears.

He ran home that day with a broken nose and a golden retriever. Less than an hour behind was a very angry mother and a police officer.

Thanks to a father who was strangely proud of him for once and who had friends in the police department, Will was let off with a huge warning. His family had to cover the boy's medical bills for missing teeth, a black eye, a bruised rib, damage to his throat, and more. His father had to use most of Will's college fund; thank God for scholarships. He didn't get to keep the dog.

The event wasn't something he thought much about nowadays. It was only when he was feeling extremely depressed or down on himself that he would think of it, like it was even more proof that he was a horrible monster who didn't deserve to live. He knew that in reality, he was only a ten-year-old kid suffering from the complicated emotions of having a father who turned to neglect and violence — but when he was already hating himself, that rationale was out the window.

He thought about it again as he drove home from Hannibal's house. For a child, it was an extremely brutal act of violence. Neither of the other two boys stepped in to help their friend, as they were too afraid of what Will might do to them. He'd gone far past roughing the kid up. The only clear vision he had from that day was the sight of the kid curled up on the ground, covering his face, begging him to stop. Blood was seeping into the leaves.

It was the first and only time he'd harmed the innocent. Because really, that's what this kid was. He was a prick, but he was still just a kid. Probably hadn't even hit puberty yet, and Will had beaten him half to death.

From that day on, Will had to come to terms with the fact that it wasn't always a smart idea to act on his instincts. He also realized that doing bad things to bad people made him feel so, so good.

He hadn't told anyone about the incident. There wasn't a point. He didn't want Molly or Jack to think he was dangerous. He didn't want to be alone again.

Watching Hannibal surround himself by gore and strangle a woman to kidnap her reminded Will all too well of his ten-year-old self. Back then, he hadn't felt any guilt either. To him, the boy got what he deserved.

Maybe they were more similar than he thought. And that was horrifying.

X - The Silkie

April 16, 2030

"I have to bring this back," Will said, gesturing to the duffel bag he'd carried into Hannibal's living room. He hadn't bothered to unzip it yet; he merely dropped it at his feet once he sat down on the couch. Hannibal eyed him.

"Why is that?"

"The FBI has noticed it's missing. I'm especially suspicious because we used the lab one so recently. I can't have anyone find it in my house."

"Is that why you've taken a small break?"

Will didn't want to admit that he'd been avoiding Hannibal, but he certainly was. The fear of being seen entering Hannibal's home was too large to ignore, and the red hot contraband he carried in his duffel bag didn't help those anxieties. He'd opted to stay home, shoving the bag into the overflow room and spending time with Molly to not aroused too much suspicion.

On the other hand, it had been nearly a week since he'd seen the man last, and he had felt every day creep by — not out of desire to see him, but because with each passing day, he knew that Hannibal grew more impatient. If he went long enough, Hannibal would wonder about their deal, and that meant more danger for Will's family. God forbid Hannibal came to see for himself what Will was doing.

His fear for their safety triumphed over his fear of being discovered. So he's finally made the decision to show up.

"..Yeah. I couldn't keep coming back to back—"

"I understand," Hannibal said. He tapped his foot in thought. "Is this too risky for you, coming over here? I may attempt to get back into my practices soon. Perhaps it would be easier there?"

Right. Hannibal was a psychiatrist; he had been for the past decade or so, after retiring from being a surgeon. He hadn't been back since his release, probably for a good reason. Will wouldn't want an accused murderer to be in such a position over his mind, even if he was exonerated. There was always the slim chance.

"You're going to reopen the office?" He couldn't hide the surprise in his voice.

"It will be easier as time goes on. Especially once Chilton is declared guilty." He stood. "Would you like a drink? Anything?"

"I— I'm okay. Thank you." His attitude towards Chilton, an innocent man, being sentenced to life or worse for a crime he was framed for shouldn't have been shocking. This was a

murderer, after all. It's not as if he would draw the line at ruining someone's reputation. Still, it was a captivating act of self-absorption. He was using Chilton's suffering for his own gain. For profit.

Before Will could bring up the subject of Chilton again, Hannibal swiveled around to face him. "Oh, that reminds me. I know you had issues with the transport last time. It was a rough journey. I promised you a Valium, and I've got those, but I also have a different approach, if you'd like." He leaned in as if sharing a secret. "Have you ever had psilocybin?"

"Like...mushrooms?"

"Yes."

Will raised his eyebrows. "Can't say I have, no."

"Well, I can give you some of that if you think it would work better. It wouldn't be enough to make you trip — only a few milligrams of dried ones. Just to relax you."

"I— huh. Well, Doctor Lecter, I appreciate the unorthodox approach. But I'd rather not, at least for right now."

"Of course. Your choice." Hannibal waved him off, unbothered. "I am making tea, though. If you'd like to stretch your legs."

Will took him up on it out of curiosity. He wanted to see the man's kitchen with his own eyes in his own body. If it looked the same, he could erase all hesitations. Everything he'd been through would be one hundred percent real. Even he couldn't perfectly replicate an entire kitchen he'd never seen before.

Sure enough, the kitchen was the exact same as in Hannibal's memory, down to the most minute detail. The palace, Hannibal's memories, were real and true. Will examined it.

"Where did you get the mushrooms, anyway?" He asked. It was the first thing that popped into his head. "Is it legal to have those?"

Hannibal feigned shock. "Oh, no, you're right. I have to get rid of them immediately. I would never want to do anything illegal."

"Oh, whatever." Will chuckled, causing a small smile to bloom on Hannibal's face. "I said I wouldn't tell."

"They're legal in Baltimore now, anyway. Since 2027. I'm a law-abiding citizen."

"Of course you are." He found it hard to imagine Hannibal possessing or taking any kinds of drugs. The man wasn't the type. "Do you take them?"

"Sometimes in micro doses. To relax. But nothing more than a quarter of the dose it takes to trip."

Will suddenly thought of Miriam Lass, of how athletic and strong she was. Certainly she would have had the resources to fight back, at least a little, against her attacker. There had to have been a day when she was in that well where she at least tried to climb out, or she took advantage of her keeper's distraction. Wouldn't that have been obvious?

But, no. There was no sign of a struggle on the inside of the well. No blood, no scratches on the dirt wall or the first five feet of brick that stretched down from the opening. No discarded parts or shards, nothing broken. No rope to restrain her. Nothing at all.

"...Did you give some to Miriam?" It would make sense. The drugs would debilitate her in another way, make her complacent or afraid. It would be easy to convince her that her keeper wasn't dangerous, but instead a protector. That she was better off down there than she would be above.

Hannibal looked him in the eyes, expression unreadable. "No," he said firmly, and Will believed him. Just this once.

Hannibal turned towards a cupboard to retrieve teacups. "Do you want any tea without drugs? I'm thinking Earl Grey," he asked with a tinge of humor, raising an eyebrow. Will exhaled a small laugh.

"Sure." If he could watch Hannibal make it step by step, then he could be assured that nothing was off about it.

Hannibal took two cups in his fingers and set them down on the counter. He stared down at them, contemplating something for a moment.

"...I gave her other things," he murmured. As soon as the words were out, he resumed his task, like something had been lifted from his shoulders. Will was left watching him in shock.

"Miriam? You gave her other drugs?" Will pressed, placing his palms on the counter. It was the first outright confession he'd gotten in this reality, in the real world.

Hannibal gazed at him meaningfully. "No," he said, although his eyes were deliberately telling a different story. "I meant that I gave her more information she needed."

He'd recognized the importance of keeping this charade. Of how the real world had much stricter consequences than his mind. Every word had to be carefully crafted, but based on the tone of his voice and the look he was giving Will, the truth was different from that. Will simply nodded at him, not wanting to press or aggravate him. He'd gotten something vulnerable out of him, even if it wasn't evidence, and that's what mattered for now.

"...Maybe another time," Will said to change the subject, "I'll try the mushrooms. But we won't need them today."

"There's no obligation, of course. I just wanted to offer, since the LOOM was so rough for you." Hannibal turned on the stove for the kettle. "You want to go in without any drugs again today?"

"I don't want to go in at all."

"Really?" Hannibal asked, although he didn't seem all that surprised. "You're the one who's been so desperate to look around."

"I think we need to talk outside of that environment sometimes, as well. Don't you agree?" Will shed his jacket and draped it over his elbow, making himself comfortable in this setting. He had to make himself at home, or else this would continue to be stilted and awkward. "I feel like I need to know you outside of your own mind. I don't always need to speak to that idealized version of yourself, you know."

Hannibal was staring at Will's forearms. He'd mirrored Hannibal's way of dress, rolling a button-down up to his elbows to expose his wrists. It made him seem more vulnerable while also creating a small link between the two of them. It seemed to be working; that, or Hannibal was totally on to him and was staring at his blatant failure to relate to him.

"You're very calloused," Hannibal said. "Your hands are."

"I'm a fisherman. Fly fishing can really screw up your fingers."

"There's something very liberating about catching your own dinner." Hannibal smirked to himself. "Do you hunt?"

Will had to suppress a shudder. Hannibal knew what he was doing now; he was making a complete joke out of his morbid actions. Being vague, but also being specific enough to unnerve Will and Will only. It pissed Will off.

"No, I don't hunt. I don't like to."

"Why is that?" Without warning, Hannibal reached across the counter and began to inspect Will's hands. He took Will's right hand in his and ran his fingers lightly over the callouses, stroking his palm and almost caressing him.

Will was too stunned to mention it. He figured it was best to just let it happen. "I eat meat, but it makes me too sad to kill the animal myself. I like animals."

"You don't like to face the reality of your actions? The reality that the pig must be slaughtered to become your bacon?"

"It's hypocritical, I know. But at least I realize it."

"That is more than I can say for a lot of people." He began to inspect Will's other hand in the same way. "But what makes a pig different from a fish?"

"The fish...they're different. They don't seem sentient to me. And it's a more peaceful death. They just suffocate and die, and then I butcher them long after."

"The fish are too primitive for you to sympathize with. They meander about in a school, mindless."

"A day in the life of a fish is probably pretty boring. They're not really even living. They're surviving."

"That's what we're all doing, though. Surviving." Hannibal shrugged. "Living and thriving in this world is more difficult every day. It's hard to find appreciation for anything."

"Yeah, but we're smarter than the fish. Way smarter. More evolved."

"We've evolved to the top of the food chain," Hannibal agreed. "But what about if you catch a fish that's unworthy of consumption? Say it's too small, or it looks sickly? Do you let it go?"

"Yeah, I put it back in the water."

"I wouldn't. Why go through the risk and the effort of catching s fish if you don't get anything out of it? Not even the trophy?" He held up Will's hand, turning it so Will was staring at his own palm. "Why give yourself the callouses if your efforts are futile?"

Hannibal was trying to convey something to him. "Even if I can't eat it, you think I should hang it up on the wall?"

"Of course. Remind yourself of the achievement. It's no easy feat, to catch a fish."

He let the words sink in for a moment, and then the kettle began to whistle. Hannibal finally dropped Will's hand, the spell broken, and went to attend to it.

They stood in silence for a while, and Will watched as Hannibal poured the boiling water into two mugs. He had seen Hannibal tear open the tea packets and place them in the mugs without tampering with them, so he trusted the safety enough to drink it. Now it was just a matter of letting the drinks steep for a few minutes.

"Do you want to bring them into the other room?" Hannibal asked, glancing up at him.

"Up to you."

Hannibal kept staring at him. Will no longer felt unnerved under Hannibal's gaze, as he seemed to do this a lot. Hannibal took in everything through physical experience. He stared, he touched, he took in small details such as callouses on the fingers and nearly hidden tones in the voice. He didn't rely on information that was told to him; he relied on what he could sense. It was part of being an expert liar, Will assumed.

Maybe that was why the palace was so vivid. His mind wasn't a collection of information and memories; it was a palace of the senses. It was the present, not memories of the past or worries about the future.

Finally, Hannibal abandoned the cups and walked over to the fridge. He opened it up, searching for something specific, and then he reached in with two hands.

"Are you still using that fridge, after what we found there?" Will asked.

"Yes." Hannibal pulled out a black lump the size of a large bowling ball. It was wrapped in plastic. He carried it over to the counter and set it down between himself and Will. "Tell me what this is, Will."

"I...is this a trick question?"

"No. What is it?"

"It's...it's chicken. It's a raw, whole chicken." He pointed to the folded, protruding limbs that were characteristic of the bird's legs and wings. "But I think you got a burnt one."

Hannibal smiled. "Yes. It's silkie chicken. A rare, black-boned bird. Do you eat chicken?"

"I do. I like it." He wasn't sure where this was going, so he didn't answer with anything other than the most surface-level comments. "But I've never had this kind."

"Alright." Hannibal nodded. "As a precaution, I've been getting my groceries delivered. I just had this delivered yesterday. It's wrapped, it's fresh. It's organic, and silkies are usually exquisite in their taste. So, given that information: if I were to cook this bird, would you come and share dinner with me? Just for one night?"

So that was the purpose of the build-up. He wanted Will to know that there was no danger in choosing to come dine with a cannibal. He'd chosen a piece of meat that was clearly distinguishable from any other kind, so that Will would immediately know if he'd turned things around on him. There was no chance that he would be fed any kind of human meat.

"You want me to come eat with you?"

"Yes. I would love to have you for dinner. It can be as early as tomorrow. Perhaps around eight?"

At this point, it wasn't the food that Will was worried about. He didn't want to spend hours with the doctor at night, long past when the sun set. Although it was completely ridiculous, Will couldn't help but feel like the man was different after dark. Like he would become more and more powerful with the encroaching blackness. He could use that opportunity to strike, and Will would have walked right into it.

"Depends. Do I have to worry about you having *me* for dinner?"

Hannibal shook his head. "Never. We had a deal, remember? Do I have to worry about a visit from the FBI?"

"Never," Will repeated.

"Then I think it would be good for both of us." He noticed Will's hesitation. "How about this: you have dinner with me, and you can keep the LOOM here. That way, no one will find it in your house. How does that sound?"

He'd harkened all the way back to the beginning of the visit. He was good. It only made sense for Will to comply; to do otherwise could cause a rift.

"Alright. I'll come over."

Hannibal smiled.

XI — The Fountain

April 16, 2030

gone fishin' back at 6 or so

have fun my big strong man. i'll be home at five like always. bring us back a fish or it's frozen pizza again

Upon arriving home from Hannibal's, Will changed clothes in the back seat of his car. He'd told Molly that he was going fishing after work, and he had to look the part. He donned the vest, a roughed-up shirt, pants and shoes made for the water, and even a baseball cap. He then grabbed a bottle of water out of the seat pouch, and he hung out the car door while pouring onto his shins and his feet. It looked like he really had been wading in the lake for an hour, rather than chatting with a cannibal.

It looked like he would be having frozen pizza, since he obviously didn't have the means to bring back a freshly caught fish. It was an interesting juxtaposition: frozen pizza tonight, organic black-boned silkie tomorrow. He'd have to invent an excuse.

"I'm home," he shouted as he walked in the back door, "and I'm empty-handed."

Molly walked into the kitchen, hands on her hips. She was still in her clothes from work, as was typical. She usually didn't change until hours after she got home, getting distracted by small chores and taking care of Walter. "Damn. Shitty day on the lake? Wally will be thrilled."

"Very. Little fuckers just weren't falling for it today." He shrugged. "I'm sorry. Plus, I was kind of out of it."

"What's wrong?" She softened at this. Her rough exterior wasn't the only part of her, and when she showed that vulnerability, Will had never felt more loved.

"It's just...it's hard not to think about everything that went on. Chilton, and Lecter, and all that."

"Are you scared of him? Lecter?"

"I don't know." It felt like the first time he'd told her the truth in weeks. "He's an intimidating figure. And I still think he's guilty."

"I'm surprised he's stayed in town. You'd think he'd want to get out while he could."

She had a good point. Why hadn't he left? Sure, it was difficult to immediately upend your life and run away, but Hannibal hadn't even brought up the idea. What was here that he wanted to stay for?

"Besides," Molly continued, unaware of the impact her first comment had had on him, "I think we're the safer now than we could ever be. Everyone's got their eye on him right now. If something happens to us, he's toast. The FBI will know."

"I don't think that will stop him."

"How do you know that?"

"I mean," Will replied a little too quickly, "if he was able to kill all those people before, who's to say he won't strike again? Maybe now he doesn't have anything to lose."

"The best we can do is live our lives. Cautiously, but not afraid. That's what he wants." She put a hand on his elbow, stroking his arm. "We can't let him take over our thoughts."

It was too late for that. Will sighed. He didn't want to bear this for any longer. He couldn't keep the truth from her forever, and the longer it took, the angrier Molly would be when she found out. He opened his mouth, ready to spill, when the sound of footsteps running down the stairs interrupted him. Walter came clamoring into the kitchen, grinning.

"No fish? It's pizza?" He looked at his mother excitedly. When she nodded, he pumped his fist in triumph. Will missed the small joys that came with being a preteen.

"The fish knew that you wanted pizza, so they held back," Will said to him, leaning against the wall as Molly dug into the freezer. "No trout for this kid."

Molly always fixed two pizzas: one loaded with sausage and pepperoni for the boys to split, and a personal pizza with her favorite toppings that the boys found disgusting. Will and Walter held their slices up in cheers, but Will's smile faded as he chewed the first bite. Every time his jaw clamped down on the lump of sausage meat, he couldn't stop the image of Hannibal's kitchen from seeping into his head. The bloody piece of human meat on the cutting board, washing blood from a sharp knife, pink ropes of intestines spooling over the corpse on the table. Even the chicken, raw and black and slimy, seemed off-putting to him now.

He ended up picking all the sausage off of his slices.

April 17, 2030

As far as Molly knew, Jack Crawford had invited Will to dinner.

Will tried to mask his nerves as he got ready in front of the mirror. He'd opted for a full three-piece suit, a simple black that made his blue eyes pop. He swept his hair the way he liked it with gel. He was sophisticated, and it made him feel impenetrable.

"Who let this handsome man in here?" Molly came up behind him and kissed him on the cheek. "Looking sharp, Graham."

"Thanks." Will smiled. "Gotta dress to impress the boss."

"You've impressed me." She leaned to whisper in his ear. "Maybe when you come home tonight, I'll be waiting for you. We can have some fun." She kissed the tender part of his neck right below the ear, and then she gently nipped at the lobe. "How's that sound?"

A sudden wave of déja vu swept over him. The sensation of her teeth on his ear felt so familiar, like she'd done it before — but he couldn't remember a time when she had. It must have been a while back, or during a time where they were so intensely involved that he hardly noticed. Sex always made things a blur.

"...Sounds great," Will replied, realizing that he'd waited too long to speak. He winked at her to cover his mistake. "Way to make me completely forget where I was."

"Try not to do that at dinner, champ." She pat his shoulder. "I'm proud of you."

"Thank you." He turned around and kissed her forehead. "Love you."

"Love you. I won't keep you if you have to go."

"Guess I should. Better early than late."

"Go off, my liege, and eat only the smallest, most upper-class portions!" She pushed him out the closer door.

He bowed playfully. "I shall return with stories of coulis and tartare."

"Just don't come home with E. coli."

"Promise." He blew her one final kiss before slipping out the closet door. "Be back before midnight."

The black suit made it easy to slip into the backyard without drawing attention, especially since it was after dark now. There was still quite a chill in the air at this time of year in Baltimore, and Will shivered as he approached Hannibal's back doorstep. Hannibal had been kind enough to start leaving the gate unlocked, so no need to climb the fence anymore.

Hannibal looked pleasantly surprised upon opening the door. "Will. You came."

"Of course I did." Will held up the bottle of wine he'd brought along. "Cabernet Sauvignon."

"How kind of you. I appreciate it."

"I appreciate you having me. And for cooking."

"I always love to have a friend for dinner." He stepped aside. "Please."

They both entered the house, and Hannibal took the bottle of wine from him. "I'll pour you some. The food will be done cooking soon."

"Thank you." He could smell it: rich herbs, garlic, roasted meat and sweet marinated vegetables. "It smells delicious."

"Silkie chicken is much more rich than its typical counterpart. It's often said to be more gamey. Along with ginseng and star anise, it will be perfect."

Will leaned against the kitchen counter, watching Hannibal retrieve the wine glasses. He contemplated for a moment before asking, "How've you been?"

Hannibal paused, eyeing him warily. "As in?"

"Just...since you've been released. How's it feel? You were really close to losing everything. And now you're being watched." He shrugged. "I just want to know what you're thinking about all of it."

Hannibal relaxed slightly at his honesty. "Truthfully, I'm not thinking about it that much. I'm more busy thinking about you."

Will stayed silent. Hannibal poured the wine as if he hadn't just dropped that kind of bombshell on him.

"...Thinking about me?"

"Yes," he replied without shame. "I think about you a lot, Will."

"Is that why you invited me over? To see me outside of business hours?"

"Every time we see each other is outside of business hours. Unless you expect me to start paying you."

Will smirked. "You're paying me with protection. And information."

"And are you making a good salary?" Hannibal slid the glass of wine across the counter. "In your eyes?"

"Yes. I'm learning a lot. And as of right now, I'm safe."

"And you'll continue to be safe. I have no plans to harm you." Hannibal took a sip of his wine. "I find you too interesting to do that."

"Interesting how?"

Hannibal opened his mouth to respond, but the faint ding of a timer interrupted him. He help up a finger. "Remind me of that thought in a little bit."

"Do you need any help?"

"No, you're the guest. Go sit down at the table. I'll be out in a moment."

Will complied, although he lingered in the kitchen doorway for a moment to watch Hannibal glide about the kitchen. He was graceful at every moment, but especially here — he smoothly tightened his apron and twirled a spoon in his fingers, licking his lips.

"Actually," he said, well aware that Will was watching him, "do you mind to bring my wine in there with you? I'll have my hands full."

"Of course." Will didn't want to intrude any longer, so he went into the dining room. There were many chairs, but only two were set with artfully folded napkins and shiny silverware. He took the one that was at the corner, not the head, in order to give Hannibal the illusion of power.

It wasn't long before the other man entered, carrying two bowls of something steaming. Will was immediately bombarded by the heavenly aroma of it all, and it only got better as Hannibal set the bowl down in front of him.

"Silkie chicken in a broth," Hannibal said. "A black-boned bird prized in China for its medicinal values since the seventh century. Wolfberries, ginseng, ginger, red dates, and star anise."

"Amazing." He'd known Hannibal was a chef, but he hadn't expected anything of this sort. The inky skin of the roasted chicken shone against the dining room candles, and the dates and berries floating alongside it were a bright cherry red. "Thank you."

"Always." Hannibal sat down at the head of table, as Will expected. "I hope you enjoy. And be careful; it's very hot."

Will decided to wait before picking up his spoon. "You said it's honored for its medicinal properties. Do I have a malady?"

"Of the mind, perhaps." Hannibal pressed his napkin into his lap. "After all, you've told me that you're having trouble. You've lost yourself. And it can't hurt to eat for the mind, can it? Especially after using the LOOM so much." He paused. "Which, are you still interested in using it? If you would like to tonight, I'll comply."

"...I think it could be useful. I want to be able to get a further glimpse into your mind."

"And why do you want that?"

"You've asked me this before."

"And you haven't answered it."

"Yes, I have."

"You've given me an answer that I'm not satisfied with." Hannibal picked up his spoon. "You've been vague about your reasonings. I would appreciate a more honest one."

Will looked down at his bowl, picking up his own spoon. He used the time spent taking a first bite to craft his answer. The soup was deliciously savory, and the meat was tender. "...I don't think you understand how lucky you are."

Hannibal raised an eyebrow.

"Your mind is so different from anyone else in this world. So much more calm and peaceful. I don't think I've ever seen you worry about anything."

"Worry is never a solution. I find it pointless."

"A lot of people don't think that way. And you've found some way to dissociate from the world, to escape into this beautiful place in your mind and stay there as long as you wish. You feel like you're truly there, you feel every effect on the senses. You've mastered a sort of mental teleportation."

"I have always been this way." Hannibal took a sip of his soup, closing his eyes to silently savor the taste. It was like every moment was blissful to him, like he was experiencing sensations for the first time. "I have always found escapism in my own mind. I found that sometimes, it was the only way to escape the mental anguish of the world."

"So you admit that you can be vulnerable."

"I never said I wasn't. If anything, I am more vulnerable now, in this very moment, than most people ever allow themselves to be."

"You really think so?" Will tilted his head. "If that was the case, then you would be telling me the truth about who you are. You would admit to what you've done."

"I have always told you the truth about who I am." Another sip. Will mirrored him. "I have no reason to lie about that. You're seeing the version of me that I only show to a select few people -- many of whom are deceased."

"Your victims?"

Hannibal held back a knowing smile. He knew exactly what he was doing. "My family."

Will shelved that information for later. "Make it clearer for me. Who is Hannibal Lecter? What's the difference between the version of you I'm seeing now and the version you show to the world? Because I'm not seeing much of a difference." He watched Hannibal's face flicker in and out of focus in the candlelight. "To me, you've always displayed yourself as prestigious. A lover of the high-end arts. A doctor, a chef. But you show the same version to the rest of the world, don't you?"

"You've seen the literal inside of my mind, Will. You know what the difference is." His expression was more firm than usual. "I've shown you a lot more than you're giving me credit for."

"And I want to see more."

Hannibal stared at him, implicitly challenging him. "And you will," he gestured to the table, "after we finish our meal."

They were standing in a different room this time.

Inside of the palace now, the two men were gazing out the large window of a vast library. Will had tried to explore upon entering, but with every step the shelves appeared to expand outwards, infinitely growing in size and potential knowledge. He took multiple steps forward, mesmerized by the effect, yet when he turned back around, he was the same distance from

Hannibal that he had been when he started. He gave up, walking back to the window and following Hannibal's stare.

They were looking out at a stunning structure, a symmetrical building with ornate windows and large pillars. In the middle, a divot in the wall stretched upwards into a domed roof, and inside sat a detailed statue of a man standing in a seashell. He was flanked by two other statues, along with marble horses and their soldiers. Water flowed from all sides down the jagged rocks into a pool, where Will could see coins congregated in the bottom.

"The Trevi Fountain," Will said. He would recognize its beauty anywhere.

"I remember you telling me that you spent some time in Rome. I'm assuming you've been here?"

"Of course." Will leaned forward, overwhelmed with nostalgia. "I would come here all the time. Most of the time I'd go in the middle of the night, to avoid most of the tourists. It was even better in the dark, lit only by the streetlights."

Will blinked, and within an instant the scenery outside turned from day to night. The fountain glowed under the light of the moon and the torches that adorned the street.

Hannibal sighed contentedly. "Oh, it's beautiful. A marvel of human design."

"It absolutely blows you away. Especially in person." His lips quirked up. "I didn't realize how much I miss it."

"What sent you away? What could ever push you from Rome?"

Will considered this. "You tell me something first. About you."

Hannibal reached upwards and pulled on the curtain rod, covering up the window. He waited a moment before drawing it back once more, revealing a completely different view from before. They were in a field that Will recognized instantly; a barn sat next to a huge silo. Will remembered approaching that very scene, when the FBI found what was really going on inside that silo. There were hundreds of bodies in there, all of them naked, oiled up with glue, and stitched together in a macabre diorama. Thinking about it again already made Will feel sick to his stomach.

He turned to ask Hannibal what this was about, but the other man was gone. Before Will could even think to look for him, he saw movement outside, and his attention was drawn to that instead.

Hannibal was now outside. He was walking towards the silo, and something on his body was glinting harshly in the sun. Will squinted, realizing that it was some sort of clear plastic. Hannibal was wearing it over his normal suit.

He watched Hannibal scale the ladder of the silo, and when he blinked again he was suddenly watching things from the doctor's point of view. Will was now the one climbing the building, reaching up for the next rung with Hannibal's hands and stepping up with Hannibal's feet. He was outside, feeling the sun shining on the back of his neck. Sweat beaded on his forehead and under the thick plastic.

He reached the pointed roof and peered inside an open square in the side. It was the exact sight he remembered from months before: contorted bodies slick with grease, their skin tones creating an ombré palate. There were so many of them that it was hard to comprehend their individuality — they all seemed inanimate, as alive now as they had ever been. Mannequins doing their modeling job.

The image of a giant eye stared up at him, peering into his soul. He waited for the lurch of nausea and disgust that he'd felt in the past.

It never came. In fact, the opposite happened.

He felt his heart seize inside of his chest, utterly struck by the same awe and wonder that hit him upon first seeing the Trevi Fountain. He basked in it. He wasn't used to this kind of joy, this childlike amazement, and it felt so good. So freeing.

He began to cry, tears dripping down into the massive eye below. He couldn't control his emotions, and that was unsettling.

"It's beautiful." The sound of Hannibal's voice snapped Will out of his dream, immediately bringing him back to the window in the library. They were still looking at the eye, but from an outsider's perspective. Hannibal turned to him. "A marvel of human design," he said.

Will's mouth hung open, trembling, and he reached into his pocket. Relief flooded him as he felt the button in his fingers, and he pressed it without hesitation.

Jolted back into the real world, Will scrambled for his things. He couldn't piece together his thoughts, and the only thing he was sure about was that he wanted out of here. He wanted to go home. And he was going to get out of here before Hannibal woke up.

When he switched on his phone to check the time, he saw that he had twelve missed calls from Molly. Before the dread from that could fully set in, he read the text from her that took up the top of the screen.

Motherfucker. Get home NOW.

XII - The Calls

April 17, 2030

"Fuck it," Will hissed to himself, fumbling with his phone. He had many voicemails from Molly, and he resisted the urge to listen to them right now. He needed to run out of here now, before Hannibal could wake up and speak to him. He didn't want to face that man right now.

But he didn't have enough time. Hannibal was already stirring, and by the time Will got up and ran through the back door he would already be wide awake. It wasn't worth the struggle, and it wasn't worth making Hannibal angry by rudely running away.

He sank back into the cushions, defeated, and began to look through the messages on his phone. Nearly all of the twelve calls had accompanying voicemails, and he didn't want to listen to them out loud for fear of Hannibal eavesdropping. It felt like an open invitation into his personal life, which he didn't want Hannibal to have.

The thing that scared him the most was the one missed call from Jack Crawford. Molly must have contacted him, and that meant that Will's story had completely fallen apart. To both of them, Will was missing, and he'd lied about where he was going. That didn't look good on his part.

"Will?" He heard Hannibal say groggily, shedding his helmet. "What's the matter? You left rather quickly."

"I can't...I have to go. I'm very sorry, Hannibal, but I have to go." Will stood up. His legs shook as he walked over to the coat rack by the back door. "I forgot about something I had going on at home. A roommate of mine is going through a lot of troubles, and he might have just gotten himself into something way worse. I just...I have to go."

"You've been found out, haven't you?"

Will froze. "What do you mean?"

"I don't think you have roommates, Will. You're a professor and an inspector at the FBI, not a college student. You're in your forties." He reached down, taking Will's hand like he had the day before. "And, I'm sorry to call you out like this, dear Will, but you had a wedding band on when we met. You may have removed it now, but you had it only earlier this month."

Will looked down. "Fuck."

"You're married, aren't you? And you wished to hide it. That, or something severe happened to your marriage right after we met, which is unlikely." Hannibal didn't seem angry. As always, he had that neutral curiosity that was almost infuriating. Will would have rather seen him get mad. "I don't like to be lied to, Will."

"I'm married." He sighed. "I have a wife. And she just found out that I lied about where I was going tonight." He held up his phone. "So I need to go home."

"And what are you going to tell her?"

"I don't know. I told her I was going to dinner with Jack Crawford, and she must have called him. He obviously blew my cover."

"Will you tell her where you've really been? Or will you lie again?"

"I don't know."

"If you tell her, then this," he gestured between the two of them, "will have to stop. Jack will probably find out about the missing LOOM, and you could get into a lot of trouble then."

"I'm more concerned about how you'll behave if this stops." Will glared at him. "I can't ensure that you'll keep your end of the deal."

"So long as I remain safely away from the eye of suspicion, then you are safe," Hannibal said. "You have always been safe, though. You intrigue me too much for anything to happen to you."

Will felt dread slowly twisting up in his stomach. "And my family hasn't been safe?"

"They mean nothing to me."

"Fuck you." Will pushed away, reaching for the door. "I'm not telling anyone about you, since you seem so eager to kill my fucking wife. But I'm not coming back, either. This is over."

Once again, this got no reaction from Hannibal. He merely nodded. "Very well. Thank you for the entertainment, Will. Do you want to take the wine home?"

"Keep it." Will was already opening the door and stepping outside into the brisk night. "I don't need it." He didn't want to touch anything that Hannibal had touched anymore.

"And the LOOM?"

Will stopped, shoulders falling. *Right*. "Either I'll figure out a way to maneuver it back in, and I'll come get it from you, or I'll give you permission to destroy it. Any way you see fit."

Hannibal nodded. "Be safe, Will."

Will figured it was safest to take that as a threat.

"*Will, I just checked your location and you're in the middle of nowhere. Where did you go? Are you okay? Just call me--*"

"*Give me a call back. Or text me, whatever. I know you probably don't want to answer your phone during dinner, but just give me a little something. You haven't moved from that random neighborhood in a while--*"

"*I'm about to call Jack. Do you want me to do that? Answer me--*"

"*You son of a bitch. You're not with Jack at all, are you? He had no idea what I was talking about. What is wrong with you--*"

"*I hope you're having fun with this other woman. Whoever she is. Get your fucking ass home right now--*"

"*We're over. You'd better have a great explanation for this, or I'm leaving your ass--*"

Will stopped listening to the messages, near tears behind the wheel. He slammed his phone down into the cup holder and groaned loudly. He was *fucked*.

If he lied and said he was cheating, then his marriage would be ruined. This woman that he'd known for years would turn around and leave him on the streets, and she would be heartbroken all over again. But if he told the truth, then he would likely lose his job and put their safety at risk. There was no way to do this properly.

He had to come up with some third strategy. Something that explained his absence without also ruining his reputation. A drug problem? Alcohol? Escaping to some friend's house that Molly didn't know that well?

Maybe he could say that he was gaining information on Hannibal. Interviewing someone that Hannibal knew, going off the clock to try and learn more about the man that he was sure was a criminal. That could be something good. It was just an unhealthy obsession, nothing more. No cheating, no fraternizing with a murderer. Yeah, that would work — especially if he burst into tears like he'd been wanting to do for weeks.

He picked his phone back up. It would be better to call Molly now. He couldn't sit in this tension anymore.

"Fucking explain yourself," Molly said in lieu of a greeting.

"I'm sorry. I'm really sorry," Will said. "I'm not cheating, I swear to God. Swear on my life. That's not what this is, and it'll never be that way. You know how much I love you. I could never do that to you."

Molly was silent for a long while. "...Then tell me what it is. And be honest."

"I'll explain more when I get home, but...it's about Hannibal Lecter."

Molly sighed. "I'd rather have you out cheating on me, to be honest. You didn't go to see *him*, did you?"

"No," Will replied a little too quickly. "God, no. I found out about some colleagues of his, and I...I decided to talk to one of them. I know it's stupid, and I know I'm not on the job, but

I'm *convinced* he's guilty. He has to be. And I just need one vital piece of evidence, just one thing that could put him behind bars. I can't let him roam free."

"You're doing this against Jack's orders, off the clock, and not telling me about it?"

"Both of you would shut it down immediately. And you'd be right. It's so stupid. It's so fucking stupid, but there's something wrong with him. Something just...sickeningly wrong. If he did all of these things, then he can't even be considered human. And he fits the profile a lot better than Chilton does."

"This is far-fetched, Will. Just tell me who this woman is."

"*I'm not fucking cheating!*" Will snapped, tears brimming in his eyes. He choked back a sob. "You know me better than that, don't you? Molly, please..." He trailed off.

Molly's voice was thick with tears, as well. "Just get home," she said flatly.

"I'm five minutes out."

It was simultaneously long and short. He wanted to get home, but he also feared what was waiting for him there. He'd been silently crying, staring blankly at the road with his hands tight around the wheel, running through all of the worst possibilities. This could be his last night at this house, for all he knew.

The house was ominously dark when he entered. He shed his shoes and coat and walked back towards the bedroom, where Molly was waiting for him on the edge of the bed. She crossed her arms.

"I just need you to be honest with me, Will. Even if you did see someone else, we could potentially work it out. But I can't have you lying to me about any of this."

"I'm not cheating, Molly." He watched Molly's expression change once she noticed his tears. He began to unbutton his shirt. "You know me. You know how much I care about you, and how much I appreciate you. You accept me; not a lot of people do that." He pointed to the scars on his chest. "I'm not a normal guy. I'm not going to run around on you like some kind of sex addict. I *love* you, Molly." He wiped his cheeks. "I love you."

Molly stared at him. "I love you too. And I want to believe you. I really do."

"But you don't?"

"Tell me what you learned tonight. Prove you were there. What's this person's name? How did they know Hannibal?"

"Molly..." Will sat down next to her. "I can't tell you that. I want them to still have their privacy. I can tell you what I learned from them, and that they're a colleague — but not who they are."

"That doesn't help your case."

"I know. But you wouldn't want your name getting out in this situation either."

"Did you get anything out of it, then?"

"I learned that Hannibal has spent a lot of time traveling through lots of different countries. He never lived in one place for long. That could be innocent, or it could mean he was running from something." Will shrugged. "He is also a renowned chef. Perfect for cooking the human meat. And he's always been very detached. Never really a vulnerable man. Empathetic, and good at understanding others' emotions, but never really good at expressing his own."

There was so much more he could say, but that would expose too much. He could only note the details that came from an outside perspective; anything too personal would reveal that he'd seen a lot more of Hannibal than Molly knew. "He's apparently a genius. Off-putting in his intelligence. According to this person, he could read people like a book."

"He sure does have all the suspicious traits."

"And that's why I can't get my mind off of this. You understand, right? That I can't just let a psychopath roam free? He must feel no remorse for his actions. He must find his deeds satisfying in some way. Satisfying, or justified, or *beautiful*, or something else terrible." More tears started to flow. He couldn't escape the remnants of that adrenaline-filled awe, the magnificence of the corpse art piece. It was still there, still reminding him that he'd looked at that scene and found it lovely. That scared him beyond comprehension.

"Hey." Molly tentatively wrapped her arm around him. "It's okay."

"I don't want to hurt you," Will cried. "I promise, I didn't do what you think I did."

"...I know." Molly leaned in. "I know you wouldn't."

"I'm sorry. I won't do it again. It just terrifies me. I was in his mind, Molly. I spoke to him. I put a target on our backs."

"We've been fine so far. And he's under strict watch. I promise, Will, it's gonna be okay."

Will didn't answer. He just cried. He cried out of fear for his family's safety, as well as his own. He cried out of grief for all of the lives disgraced and lost. He cried about the likely death of his relationship with Hannibal, and what that meant for both of them. He cried because he was so worried — worried that he would never see Hannibal again, that he would start to miss the man, that he would begin to see things in the same way as Hannibal did and be unable to turn back. What if he started feeling the same way? This propensity for violence could take over his mind, infect him like a contagious disease, and he wouldn't be able to stop it.

He didn't want to be like Hannibal. He would rather die than be like Hannibal.

He cried.

XIII - The Fight

April 21, 2030

The night after the fight with Hannibal and the subsequent one with Molly, Will had the first lucid dream.

He'd heard of this happening before after frequent usage of the LOOM, but he'd never thought much of it. Lucid dreams didn't have to be a bad side effect; he'd actually had them before, and they weren't that bad. Every negative sensation that came with them could be explained away, and once you realized it was all a dream it got easier and easier.

But now, for the past few nights, he'd been having very extreme and disorienting dreams. All of them had Hannibal in them, and all of them made him wake up with a pounding headache. Besides that, they didn't have much in common.

There was one that involved him and Hannibal strolling down the hallway of the palace, where Hannibal had led him to a door like always. Instead of showing him a memory, though, the other side of the door was just an endless black pit — one that Hannibal shoved him right into. He plummeted rapidly into the abyss, unable to grasp anything except for the faint sounds of meat sizzling and bones cracking.

He had another the next night about sitting in a poorly-lit room, choking on something that kept growing larger by the second. It absorbed all the liquid in his throat, then the muscles, then the cartilage around his Adam's apple, until it was completely eating him alive. Throughout it all, he was paralyzed to do anything about it, and Hannibal towered over him, watching the entire thing.

After that dream, Will had jolted awake with a loud gasp for air. He was in his bed, and someone to his left was stirring after the disruption. The figure turned to face him, and he saw Hannibal lying there inches from him. Will's only reaction to this was to relax. It felt just right, having him there. For a moment, he found himself smiling softly, content, moving closer to feel the other man's skin...

"What'd you dream about?" It wasn't Hannibal's voice, it was Molly's, and when Will blinked his face morphed back into that of his wife's. He was staring into the same eyes he'd seen on his wedding day, and every day since then. Those should have been the eyes to comfort him. They should have made him feel content and loved. He didn't feel any of that now.

"I...it was a choking dream. I bet I had my face buried in something."

"That's what she said," Molly replied groggily, patting him on the head. Will laughed, but it felt like he was faking it.

Jack had given him a few days off, but now Will was finally allowed to reenter the headquarters. He was ready to return to his work, to focus on another case. Everyone here acted like Chilton was the culprit. The case was closed. Only he knew the truth.

Jack was treating him with kid gloves, though, and he never brought up anything pertaining to the Ripper case. He must have thought that the mere mention of it would turn Will into a raving lunatic, foaming at the mouth to go find Hannibal immediately. Obviously, that wasn't the case, and it never had been — but that was the cost of pretending to be overly obsessed. It saved you from divorcing your wife, but it also caused your boss to figuratively baby-proof the entire FBI. No one brought up the case at all. Pictures were gone, files were gone. It was all about a new case, one that Will could easily solve and move along with his week.

It was getting difficult to bear.

He didn't want to admit it, but he couldn't stop thinking about Hannibal. Every time he closed his eyes, for a split second the palace would flash in his subconscious. He saw himself there, sitting alongside Hannibal with his head tilted back and his eyes closed, utterly at peace. He'd grasp at the feeling once it vanished, wanting to bring it back, but nothing worked.

"Can you talk to me? You're not being yourself." Molly was putting away the laundry that evening. Her back was turned, and there was something about her tone that aggravated Will. It was like she was coaching a child.

"What do you mean?" Will was laying back on the bed.

"You've just been lost. Like you're never really paying attention. And you're having those bad dreams."

"I've always had bad dreams."

"But I've never seen you wake up like that. Gasping and screaming. What the hell did you see when you were using the LOOM?"

"Nothing too terrible," he lied. "Hannibal wouldn't show me anything too compromising."

"Nothing at all? What did you waste all that time doing?"

"I *spent* it building a rapport. He was a much different subject than the rest of them. He had complete control over his memories and which ones he wanted to show me."

"Why?" Molly turned around, frustrated. "Is he God or something?"

"I don't know, Molly. He's a fucking genius, I guess."

"I feel like I've hardly heard you talk bad about him. You're either defending him, or you're trying your hardest to stay neutral. You've always got some sort of counterpoint."

"He's disgusting. He's a monster. There." The words felt unnatural now, especially after experiencing the epiphany over the silo. He'd taken on the same role that Hannibal had, and for a brief moment, he understood all of it. If it felt that awe-inspiring every time, then he would definitely be doing the same thing.

But no. *No*, he could never. He wasn't a psychopath. The guilt would be too much to bear.

"You're being a dick."

"And you're not understanding what I've fucking been through," Will snapped. "My mind has been betraying me all my life. I had a comfortable life in Italy, the most beautiful country in the world, and my own instability forced me to come back. I've got so much empathy that I don't know what to do with myself, to the point where I've been fraternizing with a goddamn serial killer because even *he* feels human to me. I couldn't even be the right *gender*, Molly! Seven years old, and I was prancing around the house hating my body and not understanding why. And now this LOOM shit has probably fucked me up beyond reason—"

"If that's true, then we're suing. We deserve a hell of a lot more than seventy-five grand." Molly took a step closer to him, scowling. "And I understand, motherfucker. You think I'm not mentally ill? I loved my husband, and he's fucking dead. Where's your empathy now, Will? Or do you only reserve it for murderers and rapists?"

"Don't say that shit to me. What are you trying to imply?"

"You act like you're some kind of savior, but your little head is just as fucked up as the people you're trying to catch. It was that way before the LOOM."

"Fuck you." Will sat up, but Molly was already storming towards him. She shoved him back against the headboard, and before he could get his bearings back she grabbed him by the shoulders and angrily pressed her lips to his. She kissed him with rage, working to pulverize him rather than pleasure him, and he had no desire to stop her.

"You do it, asshole," she said, climbing onto the bed. Will didn't hesitate, reaching to pull her shirt off and yank down her skirt. Molly undressed him, too, and they were soon letting their bare skin collide. Their limbs rubbed against each other, and Molly shifted. She knew to avoid the spot on his forearm that had been grafted off.

Molly straddled him and sat on his thighs. He was already getting hard, and the implant helped it stand up straight like any other guy's. She stroked the bottom for a minute, and he moaned in pleasure.

"Take what you want," he said.

She lowered herself onto his dick, clamping around it. From there, she moved up and down, thrusting her hips against his and rubbing herself all over him. He got into the same rhythm, and they quickly began to sweat.

She started to touch him again as she moved, stimulating the spot where his clit had been placed. His legs shook, and waves of excitement and warmth flooded through his hips and belly. He keened, closing his eyes.

"Yeah, you like that, motherfucker?" Molly shoved his face into the mattress, stroking him faster and more intensely now. He grunted, head spinning, and she began to lean down.

Among the pleasure, he couldn't shake the disorientation. He kept his eyes closed to ease the tension, but he could still see. Something was playing out behind his eyelids, and he was forced to watch. The white sheets of their bed turned a light brown, and the bedside lamps became much warmer and dimmer. The room simply became darker in general — in color, in lighting, in the way his body involuntarily jolted as a flash of freezing air ran through him. He was still laying down, still feeling a pair of lips on his dick and fingers stroking his clit, but when he turned his head to look —

Hannibal was the one sucking him off. He was good at it, too. Will felt the hands on him become wider and rougher, and the exhales of air that brushed his thigh were deeper and calmer than Molly's. He felt much more pinned down by Hannibal's strong body. He reached up to hold the back of Hannibal's head, fingers lacing through his light brown hair.

"Oh, that's good," he moaned.

Hannibal straightened up for a second. "You get more if you moan my name," he said. It wasn't like before, where the image of him had come apart the moment Molly's voice had emerged from his mouth. This was Hannibal's voice. Things had gotten so much more real.

"Molly," Will said quietly, and Hannibal didn't object. He went back down onto Will's dick, moving at a slower speed.

"Molly." It felt odd coming out of his mouth. He'd said it so many times, but now it was alien to him.

Hannibal looked up at him with warm brown eyes. They were the color of dried blood. The shape of the iris and pupil together sent a flashbulb memory through Will — the silo, looking into something beautiful, wanting nothing more than to be apart of it.

"Stop hesitating," Hannibal said, toying more with Will's clit. "Say it."

He couldn't take it anymore. The look on his face must have satisfied Hannibal, for he smirked and began to move his fingers rapidly along Will's clit. Another jolt of bliss that made his jaw quiver, and Hannibal looked at him expectantly.

"Hannibal." Will threw his head back. "Oh, fuck, *Hannibal*..."

All the good sensations halted, and he was snapped back to reality by a hard and sharp slap to the face. His head jerked to the side, and he came face to face with those blindingly white bedsheets, the ones he'd been using for a long time now. He was home.

"You fucker. What the hell is wrong with you?!" Molly snarled at him. "You're disgusting. Fucking diabolical."

Will couldn't look at her. He couldn't move his neck to face her. "Molly. Molly, I don't know what happened. I was here, and then I was there, and —"

"Is that why you're so obsessed with him? Is he fucking you? Is that where you've been disappearing to?"

"No! *No*, Molly I swear! It's only ever been you. I promise." He stared desperately up at her now. "You have to believe me. Something is really, really wrong, and I don't know what to do, and I'm scared, and I feel like I'm never gonna be the same again—"

"You're on the couch tonight."

"You have to believe me, Molly—"

"I do. That's why I'm not kicking you out entirely." Molly got off of the bed, crossing her arms to cover her bare chest. "But I don't want to look at you right now."

"I've never done anything with him. Or anyone. I've only ever seen him at headquarters, with everyone around! His house is being watched."

"I believe you," she said. "You're not that fucking stupid. But I want some time to myself. Okay?"

Will nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, I'm sorry. Molly, I'm so sorry."

"Go get ready for bed. We'll talk about this later."

Molly picked her clothes up off the floor and tossed them into the hamper, going off into the bathroom and slamming the door. Will lay there with his eyes squeezed shut, tears leaking down his cheeks, and then he finally conjured up the will to get up and trudge into the living room. He brought a normal pair of clothes with him.

He lay on the couch for a few hours, until he was certain Molly was asleep, and then he snuck out the back door.

XIV - The Epiphany

April 22, 2030

In the very early hours of the morning, Will snuck away from his place on the couch. He waited until he was outside the house to put his shoes on, and he made sure that the door closed as quietly as he could manage. He didn't want to jeopardize his tense relationship with Molly even more by sneaking out right after a fight; then again, it was probably already destroyed for the better.

He couldn't tell Hannibal everything that he saw. That was obvious. It would be humiliating to admit that he'd had such a primal fantasy, especially in front of his wife. He just had to go and get answers. He couldn't bear to live like this any longer. Something was seriously wrong with him. He was changing, and it wasn't for the better.

He thought about his argument as he got dressed in his car. Ever since they started using the LOOM, Will had felt himself growing more and more fond of Hannibal and his actions. He'd started to feel the same things that Hannibal felt, and he'd started to see Hannibal's horrific acts as something artful. The image of the corpse mural in the silo wouldn't leave his head, and he found himself unwilling to push it away. When he thought about it, it made him feel calm. It relieved him that something like that could exist in this ugly world.

Hannibal was doing something to him, and Will needed to know what. That, and he wanted to stop it.

They had to destroy the LOOM. There was no other option. It was easier than trying to maneuver his way back into the hiding place without being caught. This way, there would be no way for them to find it.

Maybe he'd tell Hannibal to burn it. Maybe then, it would explode and kill him. Whatever happened, he needed it gone.

He drove like a madman to Hannibal's house, stopping as he always did about two blocks away. He ran across the sidewalk with his head down, and when he reached the gate he realized that it was still unlocked. Hannibal was still expecting him at some point.

He figured that Hannibal would be asleep at this time of night, but when he approached the screen glass door in the backyard he saw the silhouette of the doctor sitting in the living room. As he got closer, he could make out the shape of the piano.

He knocked.

Hannibal looked up, seemingly not startled. He calmly got up from his seat and walked over to the door, sliding it open. "Hello, Will," he said. "You're back."

"How long did you give me?"

"Excuse me?"

"How long did you think it would be before I came back? How long did you think I'd make it?"

Hannibal hesitated for a moment. "...A week."

Will scoffed. "Well, you win. It took even less time than that." He entered the house without waiting for Hannibal to invite him in. "I need to talk to you. Badly."

"Alright." Hannibal closed the door behind them. "Is this about the LOOM?"

"Yes. We need to destroy it." Will shed his jacket. "I can't have it out here any longer. Someone is going to find out."

"Did someone show suspicion?"

"I just...I don't want to use it anymore. I hate that thing. It's doing some terrible things to me."

Hannibal's brow furrowed in concern. "Are you alright? Have you been having bad side effects?"

"Don't try to act all worried about me. You're doing something to me." Will narrowed his eyes. "You're messing with my brain. You're making me think differently without me realizing it."

"And what makes you think that?"

"You've got all kinds of other talents in there. And I've never thought about these types of things before using the LOOM. Now, I can't stop thinking about the things you've shown me. I'm starting to understand how you think, and I find myself agreeing. And I don't like that."

"I can't influence how you think, Will. I can give you advice, tell stories, show you memories, but I can't mold your mind."

"Hannibal, please. Be fucking truthful with me," Will muttered with clenched teeth. "I just need to know what's wrong with me."

"I don't think there's anything wrong with you. You're simply absorbing the things that you've seen. That's not a fault in itself. You have very high empathy, and you're understanding how I feel. That doesn't mean that you have to feel that way, too. Or, at least, not all the time."

"It's ruining my life, Hannibal. I've been married for years, I have a stepson, a good job, and it's all fallen apart within weeks. I've stolen from the FBI, I've been sneaking around on my wife, and she thinks I'm cheating on her."

"It wasn't my choice for you to start coming here."

"No. But you're tampering with me. And I'm done for good this time." Will glared at him. "Show me where it is. We're destroying it."

Will caught a subtle flash of weakness in Hannibal's eyes, but it only lasted a millisecond. "Alright," he said, "but will you humor me for a moment? There's one more thing that I would like to show you. Just one more memory."

"It wasn't important enough for you to show me earlier?"

"I didn't think you were ready. But I promise, after this, we can destroy it, and you don't ever have to speak to me again. I'll leave you alone, along with your family. I just want you to know this. I promise."

"You're going to do something when we're in there. Deal the final blow."

"Will, please. I can tell you about it, but you won't believe me without proof."

"Nothing in your brain counts as proof. You could be making all of it up, if you wanted."

"Real and false memories are much different. We talked about this. Real memories are short, choppy, less cinematic. They're only focusing on one specific moment. False memories play out like something from a movie."

"And, since you know that, you can craft a false memory look like a real one."

"I've kept my word, Will. I've kept my promises. Please, let me show you. You can decide for yourself if it's real or false."

Will watched for any signs of vulnerability in that well-crafted mask of his, and when he looked into the man's eyes for long enough he saw it there. He saw desperation, a longing for something out of reach. He softened, then finally relented.

"Okay," he said. "Just this once."

They knew the drill at this point. It wasn't long before they'd transported themselves inside, and they stood in the main corridor. Hannibal was staring down at a large door at the end of the hallway, the largest and most imposing door. It was large and made of some sort of impenetrable steel.

"This is a memory that I like to leave alone," he said. "It upsets me to look back on it. But I think you deserve to know what happened between us."

Will remembered the vision he'd had in front of Molly. "Between us?"

"There are many things that happened between us. But this is the thing I regret the most."

He began to walk towards the door, and Will followed. "What are you talking about? I've known you for two weeks."

"You've known me for much longer than that." Hannibal placed his hand on the knob. "You'll see in just a moment. And I hope it helps you remember."

He tugged at the door, and with a lot of effort he was able to pull it open. The inside of the room was dark, and Will didn't want to go in alone.

"I want you to walk me through this," he said. "I need you to explain what's happening."

"I can be there alongside you. But I won't explain anything until it's over. I don't want to sway how you think of it."

They walked inside.

Hannibal closed his eyes and took a deep breath, and the scene morphed into the inside of a glamorous kitchen. Hannibal was kneeling on the floor near the fridge, his shirt stained with blood and his hair hanging raggedly in his face. He carried a large knife in his left hand, which Will could see shining in the dim kitchen light.

"Go," the present Hannibal told him. "Watch what happened to us."

Will shut his eyes and begged himself to be there. He wanted to know what was going on. What Hannibal was talking about.

When he opened them, he felt the hot and sticky lood against his skin. The shirt was stuck to him, and strands of Hannibal's light brown hair hung in front of his eyes. Will hardly noticed them, though, as he was too shocked by what he saw right in front of him.

There, slumped on the floor against the cabinets, was himself.

He was inside Hannibal's body, looking down at Will Graham. It was like looking into a mirror, seeing himself from someone else's eyes. This Will was staring up at him with betrayal and pain in his eyes, gasping for air and clutching his abdomen. There was a large stab wound on his torso, and Will felt a drop of warm blood fall from the blade he held onto his leg.

In this vision, he was Hannibal. And Hannibal had stabbed Will Graham.

The two of them were talking, words spouting from his mouth without him even noticing. He was still reeling so much from the sight of himself in Hannibal's memory that he couldn't focus on the dialogue. But now, he listened.

"Do you believe you could change me," Hannibal said, "the way I've changed you?"

This version of himself breathed unsteadily, gazing up into his eyes with conviction and understanding. "I already did."

Hannibal's body stood. "I forgive you, Will," he said. "I hope that you can forgive me."

Despite this version of Will desperately calling for him to come back, Hannibal walked away from him, leaving him to bleed.

The vision dissipated, and Will tore himself away. He ran out of the memory, right out the door, and halfway into the hallway, tumbling down onto his knees. He folded over, resting his forehead on the ground. His head pounded more agonizingly than it ever had, and information shoved its way into his brain in droves. He couldn't keep up with it all. The images emerged in snippets, just long enough for him to recognize them, before another one showed up.

Roman shaking his hand. Will's hand wrapped tightly around the hilt of a knife, burying it in the chest of a suspect who had attacked him. Being coached through that guilt. Watching Roman operate in an emergency and realizing how similar he was to the profile Will had crafted. Roman reaching for him while Will's body seized, hot flashes and lost time, waking up on the roof and not knowing how he'd gotten there, flashing lights and feeling so, so sleepy. Sobbing as his mind slipped away from him. Knowing something was deeply wrong, going through brain scans and still finding nothing. Handcuffs on his own hands, the evidence of his crimes irrefutable and yet he still wasn't sure what he'd done. Roman staring at him from behind bars -- but on the wrong side -- with a smirk of triumph.

"Oh, my God."

Finally finding his freedom but still being under Roman's thumb. Deciding he wasn't going to allow that anymore. Returning to the man who had hurt him worse than anyone else ever had, in order to get his revenge. Inching closer and closer to this man, knowing his true colors and yet going back anyway. Finally realizing that his guilt from before wasn't guilt over what he had done; it was guilt over how much he'd loved it. Nearly being killed by a

stranger and bringing his body to Roman's home. The smell of a bloodied corpse in his car. The way it felt to twist the neck of another living person and hear it snap...

Kissing Roman on the neck, feeling the man's hands stroking his body and thrusting against him, moaning his name and feeling his breath on his ear as he said, "That's not my name. My name is --"

"Hannibal," Will whispered, the word meaning something completely new to him now.

Hannibal crouched down on the ground next to him, rubbing circles on his back. "You're here."

"*Hannibal*." It was a guttural cry, coming from the deep recesses of his body and echoing through the palace.

"You're back." Hannibal had morphed into someone different. When Will looked at him, he had tears in his eyes, and his voice was shaking. He saw the man he'd fallen in love with, the man that he'd betrayed and who decided to get his revenge. "Will, you're back. Do you remember me?"

"...Of course I remember you." Will placed a hand on his stomach, tracing his scar. "You tried to kill me."

XV - The Truth

Five Years Ago

Florence, Italy

Will didn't remember calling for help. Maybe it was Hannibal. Maybe he'd planned to hurt Will like this for hours, perhaps days, and he knew to call for help before things got too bad. Maybe he'd called for help before he'd come around the corner, confronting Will in the kitchen and making him think that this was actually going to happen, they were actually going to run away together--

No. Someone was shouting questions at him, someone was carefully lifting him up onto a stretcher, he was flying across the pavement. He was soaring above the streets of Italy, sirens singing in his ears. He was bombarded by a blinding light, and he wondered if he was finally facing the gates of Heaven.

He was closer to Heaven than he would have been in America. All of the hospitals here were named after saints. But that was like being in an abyss, as opposed to the trenches.

They had to surgically stitch him up and monitor the wound for infection. He stayed in the hospital for days, staring down at the cut in his stomach that would leave a massive scar. He would forever be reminded of what Hannibal had done to him.

But he didn't have to be.

He kept his final option hovering in the back of his mind. It would be a violation of every rule at his job, but he'd already crossed the line many times. It wasn't like Pazzi would be around to catch him.

The next day, a coworker called to tell him of Rinaldo Pazzi, his boss. He had been found late the previous night. He was hanging out of a window, hung by the neck, with his torso cut open and his intestines hanging down to brush the cobblestone streets. Will took the news

with as much dignity and false grief as he could muster. He cried for a moment, but he wasn't sure why. It may have been for his lost love, rather than his lost colleague.

The police had a lot of questions for Will. There was no DNA found on Pazzi's body, and they suspected that his death was correlated to Will's attack. They wanted any clues that Will had to offer, as this could be the final connection to the Monster of Florence.

"Were you right all along?" One of his coworkers, a woman who simply went by Bev, asked him. She had stuck with him for a long time, even through his false arrest. She believed him that he wasn't a murderer, but she hesitated to say that the real culprit was Roman Fell. He had a clean record. But now, it seemed like she was questioning herself. "Could it have been Roman? Where is he?"

Will sighed. "It was Roman," he decided to admit. "But that's not his real name. He told me that much, but he didn't tell me the real one. I was trying to convince him that we were similar. That we saw the world in the same way. He believed it, for a while. But he found out the truth, and he took action."

"You got too close, Will." Bev frowned. "You were trying so hard to lure him into your trap that you didn't notice the rope around your neck. He was waiting for the right opportunity to strike, I bet. And now you nearly died."

"I'm alive. He's not." Will turned to look at her, trying to convey strong honesty through eye contact. He wasn't great at either of those things. "Roman carried me for a few blocks. He set me on the ground. And then I watched him throw himself off the Ponte Vecchio." His eyes watered. "He wanted me to watch. I never saw him surface."

"You watched the man die."

"It was too late for him. I think he was in love with me." He let one tear drip artfully down his cheek. "When I didn't want him, there was no point in him continuing on. He'd been caught. And he was alone."

He told the same story to the police. Nothing about it was true. Will had indeed been found slumped against the Ponte Vecchio, but only because it was an important relic to the both of them. He and Roman -- Hannibal -- had had many conversations on that bridge, many intimate glances and brief touches. It was right by Hannibal's home, which was convenient for late night walks. Will had mustered the strength to drag himself to that bridge, convinced that it would be the site of his death. On the way to the hospital and into the night, he crafted a story around that to keep Hannibal safe.

"Your statement is that you saw Roman Fell die, correct?" A detective asked him for the final time. "There is no benefit in searching for him?"

"If you want to search for his body, you can." Will sank into the pillows in his bed. "But you won't find him alive."

Somehow, either because of his reputation or the seemingly valid story, the police believed him. And that was that. Roman's face was released to the media, but only to announce his crimes and his death. There was no reason to worry about him wandering the streets alive.

When Will was finally released with many bandages and medicines, he waited until late that night to go back to the office. He wasn't there to work, though; there was something in particular that he was looking for.

Technology had expanded so much in the past few years. Prototypes for all kinds of defensive and interrogative strategies had been sent over to Italy from America, since the grand old USA didn't want to be caught testing on humans. The FBI offered the Italian offices enough funding to last for centuries, as well as cover-up, to get them to test their products. Any damages would be taken care of by the CIA.

The LOOM was one of these instruments. But Will wasn't interested in this, as he wasn't even aware of it at the time. He was searching for something else.

It wasn't hard to find. He had the keys to Pazzi's office, and the building was rather empty well after midnight. He'd told his coworkers that he was going to retrieve some things from Pazzi's office, as the two had worked together so often that Will had left a lot of things behind. Pazzi's office wasn't the crime scene, anyway; there was nothing suspicious about

going in there. He limped across the hallway and stared at Pazzi's door, wondering if it would ever be opened again after this.

He retrieved the item he'd been searching for, holding it carefully in his hands, and slipped it into his bag; he then closed the door on Rinaldo Pazzi for the last time.

He left a letter of resignation in the main lobby. He left a note taped to his apartment door, stating that he wouldn't be back, and he left a bundle of cash for his last month of rent. He packed his entire life into one suitcase, texted a few coworkers to tell them that he was moving back home, and hopped on a train.

He rode down to Naples and booked a plane ticket for the next day, paying for a cheap inn. No one should know where he was. He needed the privacy.

It was only then, once he was settled into his room and able to take a breather, that he took his new trinket out of his bag.

Out of all the FBI's tools, the Proto-MED was probably the most powerful. The most dangerous, if used incorrectly. It was a prototype Memory Erasing Device, used to completely wipe the memories of a subject in time increments. Switches on the instrument allowed one to select how long the amnesia stretched back to — it could be the last five minutes, or it could be the last month. One year was the highest it went for now, but that's all Will needed. It was hard to believe that Hannibal had only waltzed into his life months before, but that was what Hannibal did. He came to a place, he saw what he wanted, and he conquered it. And then he walked away.

Will switched the device to stretch back eight months, to the middle of October. It would be three days before he got the call from Pazzi, asking him to come tour the facility. He wouldn't remember Pazzi at all. Luckily for him, he'd told his bosses that he was simply going on an extended break — he didn't want to lose his job at the FBI, so he'd decided to work on the case Pazzi wanted, then come home. No one at work knew he was going to Italy. They only found out about it after the fact, and they never found out his true purpose for being there. News of his arrest in Italy hadn't been made public — media was different there — and it had all been erased from his record. Everything was conveniently tied up for him; no one could ever remind him of Italy. There wasn't a single chance that he would remember things.

He deleted the contacts of everyone he'd known in Italy. Erased all calls and texts from after October, his search history, all of his photos. He wrote himself a short note with a notepad and dull pencil that were left on the nightstand. Nothing too detailed, just enough to get future him to listen.

Future Will — I know this is confusing. I know you can't remember how you got here. But just take that plane ticket and go home. It's better that you don't remember anything. It will ruin your life if you do.

You've done nothing to get into trouble. You're safe to travel freely as yourself. Just don't ask anyone about the past year. Don't ask yourself. It's not worth it. You were on a soul-searching vacation for the past eight months, since October. That's all you need to know. That's all the FBI knows. You can go back to the classroom no problem.

You've got more life in front of you. Take advantage of it. Just do me a favor before you leave and destroy that Proto-MED. The device. It's dangerous.

— Will

From there, he set the note within his vision and lay down on the bed. He held the device up to his head like a pistol, hand shaking.

"Hannibal," he said quietly to the ceiling. "I'm not gonna miss you."

The room was silent.

"I don't want to know where you are or what you do. I don't want to think about you anymore." His eyes stung as tears surfaced. They ran down his temples and onto the pillow.

Forgetting about this meant forgetting about Pazzi, too. It meant that the hour before he showed up to Hannibal's house would be erased. That hour in which he snuck up on his colleague, his boss, a man he'd cooperated with for months, and plunged a blade into his

torso. Sliced him open from side to side, pulling out intestines like gutting a fish. His hands had run along the sharp rope, tightening the knot, his knuckles radiated pain as he jabbed his fist into the stained glass window.

"I did that for you, Hannibal," Will said. "I wanted to surprise you. But you...you wanted to surprise me."

He placed his finger on the trigger. "I don't think I can forgive you, Hannibal," he admitted. "At least, not yet. Maybe one day, when it's been long enough for the pain to go away, I'll remember you. And maybe then I'll forgive you. But I can't right now."

He took a final deep breath. "Goodbye, Hannibal."

The device didn't work instantly. It took about fifteen seconds for the forgetfulness to start seeping in: he would imagine scenes between himself and Hannibal, but then the man would disappear and become a featureless shadow. Same with Pazzi. Some of Italy's most beautiful sights were scratched from his memory. He and...that man. What was his name? What color were his eyes?

Time dripped away from him, and for a long while he basked in the blissful unawareness. Oh, what was the name of that lady in the hospital? Was he in the hospital at some point? No, he wasn't. He was in Virginia. After all, that's where he was yesterday. An hour ago. A minute ago. He'd just laid down for a nap. It was October, his favorite month. He hadn't gone anywhere.

He was a professor at the FBI. He had a class to teach. Oh, shit, was he oversleeping?

He bolted awake, terror rushing through him as he realized that he didn't recognize his surroundings. Where the hell was he? How had he gotten here?

What had happened to him? He racked his brain for any memory of the past while, but nothing came to him. What was he doing in this random hotel?

He picked up his phone and gasped when he saw the date written across the top. It was May. It was the middle of May! Surely something was wrong with that. Last thing he'd known, it was October.

He tried to remember Thanksgiving. Christmas. New Year's. Easter. Nothing came to mind. He couldn't even remember yesterday. He just knew that at some point, he'd been in bed at home, and it was October. Now it was eight months later, and he didn't know a thing.

He sat up and heard the crinkling of paper.

Someone had left a note for him.

XVI - The Two of Us

April 22, 2030
Baltimore, MD

Every single emotion came rushing back to him: every interaction they'd shared, the brushes of skin on skin that built up static electricity so strong they'd eventually become lightning. They were unpredictable together, ruthless. They had so much potential. But both of them had made grace mistakes, and their relationship had vanished as quickly as a summer storm.

"Oh, God. Oh, my God. Fuck. Fuck, *fuck*..." Will doubled over, resting his elbows on his knees and staring closely at the hall carpet. His breathing quickened, and his head couldn't handle the pressure of all those memories flooding back at once. He began to cry, massive racking sobs emitting from deep within his chest.

"Oh, Will. You're going to be okay. You're safe." Hannibal rubbed his back. Will simultaneously wanted to pull away and to bury himself in Hannibal's arms. "What happened to you?"

"I don't know. Fuck it. *Fuck*!" He let out a loud scream, which echoed through the entire hallway. It was cathartic to do something like that, even if it was only in this mindscape. "I think I did something terrible."

"Calm down, Will. Please talk to me."

"I can't— I can't do this. I need to get out of here. I need to go home." Everything was crashing down. There was a reason he'd gone through such lengths to forget; all the pain from five years ago that he'd spent all this time avoiding was now plunging into his heart and brain. His body shook with the pressure. "I need to *leave*. Let me out of here, Hannibal. Please."

"You're free to go whenever you wish. You've never been trapped here." Hannibal kept his voice low and gentle. "But I don't think you're fit to go home in this state. You can't face your family like this."

Hannibal was right. He couldn't go home. "I lost eight months of my fucking life. I spent five years walking around with that massive gap in my memory, and I never knew why. I never searched for the answer, because I was scared." Will grimaced, body straining against the effort of his cries. He could hardly speak. "Oh, my God...I thought I'd gone crazy. I thought I had a breakdown. But I did it all to myself."

"Please calm down, Will. It's going to be okay." Hannibal massaged his shoulder and the back of his neck, leaning close. "Breathe. Keep in touch with your senses, remember? It's raining again."

Will tried to focus on taking full breaths, but his lungs kept wanting to give out on him. He looked down at the carpet, honing in on all the details of the pattern and materials. He was

clutching his head, and his curls poked out from between his fingers. He felt the scratch of his hair on fragile skin. Hannibal's hand was on him, touching him with care, and he could hear Hannibal's breathing along with the faint pattering of rain. The palace was the only protector from the storm. It held precious memories and emotions, and now it was holding them both safely in its clutches. They didn't have to feel anything they didn't want to. It was so easy to wipe away the negative energy and focus only on the ethereal haze that drifted over the entire place.

"What did you do, Will? What happened to your memory?" Hannibal asked when Will's breathing became more stable.

Will looked up at him. "Did you do something? Are you tricking me right now?"

"What? No. *No*, Will, that's not what's happening." Hannibal's voice was firm enough that it made Will reconsider. After all, he had just seen everything flash before his eyes. He had seen himself holding that device, felt warm tears running down his face, heard the rumbling of the train down to Naples. "I don't know what happened, but it wasn't that. I promise. You know how much I regret--"

"*Stop*. Just stop." Will held up his hand. "You're right. I don't think it could have been you. I...do you remember the Proto-MED? One of the things in Pazzi's office?"

"Possibly? Remind me."

"It was a prototype for a memory eraser. You could choose any chunk of time you wanted, up to a year, and have a person forget everything after a certain point. Like, everything that happened in the past five minutes, or five days...or eight months."

Hannibal's face fell. "Oh. Yes, I remember." He always tried to keep his composure, but Will caught an extreme sadness in his features. His brow came together, lips opening in a shocked silent gasp. His eyes shone with tears, which stunned Will more than anything else. "Did someone use it on you?"

"I used it on myself. After you tried to kill me," Will said.

"*No*." Hannibal touched Will's cheek, turning his head so they were face to face. "No, Will, that was never my intention. I left you alive on purpose. If I'd wanted you dead, I would have done it then and there."

"You wanted me to suffer."

"I wanted you to understand." He held Will's other cheek, now cradling his face in his hands. There was something so tender about it. Will could feel the warmth of his palms on his cheeks as vividly as if they were in the real world. "You toyed with my heart, Will. You gutted me. Carved out my insides and put them on display. I wanted you to know how it felt." Hannibal blinked, and tears began to run down his pronounced cheekbones.

"You walked away from me. I was in agony, and you *walked away from me*."

"*I know*!" Hannibal raised his voice, which startled Will. He couldn't remember Hannibal ever doing that. "Why do you think I've kept this memory locked away, so far down the hall behind a door of steel? I've spent every day since then regretting what I've done. Since the moment I found out about Pazzi." He leaned in to press his forehead to Will's. "Did you kill him?"

Will felt a lump rising in his throat. "I was in the hospital after you stabbed me, and I remember trying to hide that...I did," he whispered around it. "I killed him." The realization hit. "And I did it for you."

Hannibal's breath hitched. "That's what I was afraid of. I didn't know that when I stabbed you. If I'd known...you gave me such a gift, and I paid you back by hurting you."

"It was an offering. It was me reaching for your forgiveness." Will gave a sad smile. "And I did get your forgiveness. But only after the pain."

"You were going to tell me that night, weren't you? When you came into my kitchen alone."

"I think so. Yes. But you were angry."

"Maybe you remember Pazzi's wandering mind. Always forgetful, leaving his phone out anywhere and then spending forever searching for it. Lost his glasses on the top of his head. He's an easy man to follow." Hannibal swallowed. "About a week before, I planted a bug in his phone. It was an app that let me go in and access the microphone whenever I pleased. I could listen in on conversations."

Will let that sink in. "You must have heard us talking. Did I say something bad?"

"He wanted to sell me out to the mafia. And you agreed with him. You told him that you were close. That you had plans to harm me."

Will's stomach dropped. "I...I was working for him. Surely I was lying. Trying to keep my cover, right?"

"Well, then, was it necessary to call me an unforgivable monster?"

Will jolted. "What?"

Hannibal looked up towards the ceiling. Will suddenly heard his own voice echoing through the vast hallway, clearly a remnant of a memory. It was tinny and muffled, like it was coming out of a cheap speaker.

"This is more than your typical mission, sir. This man is extremely dangerous. He's an animal. A sick, ravaging monster."

"Then we cannot feel guilty for what we plan on doing." Pazzi's voice now. *"We are ridding the world of sin. May God forgive us for clearing the world of filth."*

"May He. But God will never forgive him." A pause. *"No one can. No one should. He is irredeemable. A disgrace."*

Hearing his own voice say such terrible things about Hannibal made Will's heart quake in his chest. What had he been thinking? Yes, he had an image to uphold by tricking Pazzi, but he must have been more attached to his own humanity than he remembered. He couldn't imagine the hurt that Hannibal felt then. The betrayal.

"Did I really say that?" He couldn't remember up until now. "Hannibal..."

"Those words *gutted* me, Will."

Will dug through his mind to try and figure out what his reasoning could have been. What would have made him double-cross both men like that? It seemed like--

He couldn't pick a side. Of course. It was the same moral fear that he had been going through the past few weeks. The ethics of murder versus the animalistic pleasure that it gave him, the admiration of beauty. It happened quickly because his brain had done it before. It sided with Hannibal before, otherwise he wouldn't have killed Pazzi -- and it was siding with Hannibal again.

"I was a coward." Will cautiously reached for him, placing his hand on Hannibal's knee. "That's why. I couldn't decide which side I wanted to be on, and so I tried to choose both. And it ended up hurting both of you."

"Whose side are you on now?"

"I killed Pazzi for you, only a few days later. You know which side I'm on."

"No, Will, I don't. And I think that you're still torn, as well." Hannibal's gaze turned slightly more steely. "You cannot keep dancing on this line between lies and truth. You cannot run away this time." He rubbed his forehead, exhaling. "None of that matters now, though. It doesn't do any good to talk about comeuppance, revenge, making up for your bad deeds. At least not right now." Hannibal held his face again, gazing into his eyes. "I just want to be with you. I just want to see you."

Will stayed silent, letting him take in all he wanted. Now that his memory was mostly restored, the grief of losing five valuable years was setting in, and he found himself wishing that they could have spent it together.

"I missed you," Hannibal said softly. "Oh, how I've missed you."

Will's muscles relaxed. "I don't think I can say the same. I haven't had the memory to do that."

"If you had your memory this whole time, would you say you missed me?"

Will hesitated. "We didn't end on a good note the last time we saw each other, Hannibal. In Italy."

"I know. But we both hurt each other, and I still missed you. Despite what you said about me, I still missed you. Especially when I heard about Pazzi's death. We went through so much together. Too much for me to not miss you."

Will considered the five years that had gone by since then. He couldn't imagine having his memory at all, even in a hypothetical situation. He tried to remember certain situations between the two of them, and he could only find vague ideas. The details, the nuances of the conversations, and the obvious intimacy that must have been present were all wiped from his mind. They were hiding behind a window covered in wet condensation. They were unclear colors and shapes that meant nothing to him.

"Hannibal, I can't..." His eyes stung, and he couldn't stop the quivering of his lower lip. "There's still so much I don't remember. It's all so blurry. I feel so empty."

Hannibal leaned in to embrace him. Will cried into his shoulder, his body reacting in a primal way to his touch. His mind didn't remember, but his body did. He felt warm, comforted, *right*.

"Did we..." Will gasped for air. "Did we have sex?"

"We did." He couldn't read Hannibal's tone.

That explained everything that had happened in bed with Molly. His brain was making connections. He remembered the other night, when Molly had bitten his earlobe, and he felt some odd wave of deja vu. Hannibal had done the same thing five years ago.

"I can't remember everything. It's all just shadows." He wrestled his arms out and wrapped them around Hannibal. "But I know you. I know us."

"That's good. That's more than we could say before." He enjoyed feeling the vibrations of Hannibal's body before the words came out. "What else?"

"Only the day itself, really. The stabbing. Killing Pazzi. Before then, it's too vague for me to put together the story."

Hannibal paused. "Maybe that's what we should focus on, then," he said. "We have a very powerful tool at our disposal. I can show you the memories that I have, and maybe they can help jog yours."

"Right. Yes." Will opened his eyes. "You're right. That's what I want to do. I want to remember, Hannibal."

"It's not all going to be pretty." Hannibal pulled back, a warning in his eyes. "I did some terrible things to you, Will. But I believe I've gotten my comeuppance."

"How?"

"I longed for you for five years. I felt the guilt of you giving me such a wonderful gift, and me paying you back by gutting you. And then I finally stumbled across you, and you didn't even know my name." He swallowed back tears. "It was a nightmare."

"I want to see all of it. I don't care how ugly it is. I want it all." Will nodded. "My brain knows you. It's drawn to you. It's siding with you. But it just needs to be reminded of why."

"Then that's what you shall have." Hannibal smiled softly. "But first, I think we both need a drink."

XVII — The Bed

April 22, 2030

Will downed two shots of whiskey, enjoying the warm and fuzzy sensation they sent through his brain. It was like cotton padding, a warm bath after everything he'd put his mind through. He leaned against the counter, eyes closed, fighting back overwhelmed tears. He waited for a moment, and when he opened his eyes again he noticed that Hannibal was staring at him.

"Thank you," Will said. Hannibal leaned over to take the glass from him, pouring himself a shot and swallowing it. His lips touched the same spot on the rim that Will's had.

"Seeing you standing in front of me for the first time in five years...I couldn't concentrate on a word of your lecture." Hannibal shook his head. "I was in shock. I thought I'd never see you again. It was sheer coincidence that brought me to the Academy, and when I heard your name, I nearly bolted to the lecture hall."

"And then I didn't recognize you at all."

"I thought you were lying. Or doing it to spite me. But there was nothing in your eyes. Not a spark of any emotion whatsoever, apart from maybe boredom. I tried to drop hints, but you showed nothing. And then I never heard from you after, so I knew it wasn't just a public show."

"Until now, all I remembered was being in Italy. I thought it was an extended vacation, to clear my mind. I told everyone that's what it was. One moment it was early October, and then I was waking up in a random bed in Naples. I had the Proto-MED next to me and a note from myself, telling me to not search for answers. To just go back home. And then I realized it was the middle of May."

"Nearly eight months of memory, all vanished." Hannibal stepped around the counter, approaching him with wide eyes. "It's a remarkable device. But it was used in the wrong way."

"And it apparently doesn't take much for me to regain the memories, either. Just a little push seemed to be enough."

"What did you do with the device? Perhaps there's a reverse option."

"I threw it off the Ponte." Will sighed. His eyes felt so heavy now. He ran his fingers through his hair. "My note said to destroy it. Fuck."

"Will." Hannibal took Will's hand, bringing it down off of his head and instead holding it to his own chest. His thumb stroked Will's knuckles back and forth. "It's okay. You look exhausted. Maybe we should both get some rest tonight, before we carry on with anything else."

Will flinched, remembering what was waiting for him back at the house. "I can't go home," he whispered. "I've ruined everything there. I can't."

"What happened?"

"It was humiliating. We fought, started screaming at each other over how I've been acting different. And then she started kissing me, and we...we had some angry sex. But she was doing something, and then I felt everything sort of drip away. Like candle wax. And she was suddenly," he paused, knowing that the only reason he was even going this far was due to his drunkenness, "she suddenly turned into you. And we were in a different room, and you were doing things to me. And I said your name."

Hannibal raised an eyebrow. "I'm sure she didn't like that."

"I wish that I could remember something actually important. Not whatever that was." Substantial conversations were gone, relegated to a place deep within his mind that he could never reach without help. But being pinned against a wall, having his earlobe bitten, the pleasure moving up his thighs and into his belly, stomach fluttering with excitement — that was vivid.

"I think what we did was important." Hannibal squeezed his hand. "I quite enjoyed it."

"You know what I meant." Will flushed. "But, yeah. Basically, I can't go home. She's having me sleep on the couch, and I just...after finding all this out, I can't go back there." It felt like everything he'd been building up for years was all a farce. His marriage, his career, the ideas he had about himself and who he was meant to be — they were all constructed after Hannibal. They were replacements for someone that had left such an impact on him that he needed technological intervention.

Hannibal sank his venom into Will for good that night when the knife entered his body. He'd never left. Will was a fool for thinking he could erase him.

"Stay with me," Hannibal replied. "I don't want you to leave. When I said you should rest, I meant here."

"I should probably call her. Just so she doesn't come looking."

He picked up his phone, leaving a message while trying his best to sound sober. He told her that he was staying the night at one of the FBI's guest dorms, since he wanted to give her and Walter some space. He told her he loved her, but for the first time ever it felt rehearsed, like it was habit rather than something genuine.

Hannibal had fixed them both glasses of water while he made the call, and Will gulped some of his down. "Follow me," Hannibal said. "I'll get you something more comfortable."

They walked down the hall to a guest room that was half the size of Will's house. The bed was massive, with an ornate headboard and a beautiful landscape painting above it. Hannibal turned on the bedside lamps, which were warm and inviting.

"I'll get you some clothes. You can make down the bed however you wish."

Will pulled down the pristine sheets and primed the pillows for himself. He felt weird getting his clothes from outside on the clean sheets, so he waited for Hannibal to return with lounge pants and a grey T-shirt. He got changed in the bathroom, noting how terrible the bags under his eyes looked, and trudged back into the bedroom with a new wave of pure weariness. He needed to sleep.

He'd just laid down in the bed when Hannibal appeared in the doorway. "Is there anything else I can get you?" He asked, having changed into his own sleepwear. Will stared at him, an itch wriggling through the back of his head. Something was there. Something was surfacing.

"Come here," Will said softly.

Slightly bemused, Hannibal obeyed. Will moved over, patting the spot on the bed next to him and watching as Hannibal sat down, then laid down, beside him.

When Hannibal's head hit the pillow, that's when it all came back.

That face had looked at him many times before. It was often accompanied by a smile, slightly smushed against the pillow but still lovely all the same. He remembered seeing Hannibal in an similar sweater to the one he was wearing now. He remembered the feeling of his body on the other side of the bed. His posture, his curves, were all permanently stored away in his mind. He would now recognize that man in any context, even if it was the way he laid in a bed. Getting his core memory of Hannibal back had changed a lot of things.

"...I remember this," Will murmured.

"That's good." Hannibal stroked Will's curls, brushing them away from his eyes.

"It was more than one night, wasn't it?"

"We were in bed together many nights, yes. But the very first night was the only night we had sex. After that, we just slept in the same bed most nights."

"We just laid down and went to bed together?"

"Things escalated, but then you always wanted to stop. You said that you didn't want to have sex again. I respected that. We kissed. Touched. But that was it, and then we went to bed."

"What led to all of that? The first time?"

"It's a long story. I think it's better if we relive that in our memories, rather than me trying to explain. It needs a lot of context,"

"So you knew I was trans? You found out that first night?"

"Yes." Hannibal's lips turned up as he remembered something. "And, this will sound ridiculous, but when we first met again at your lecture, I had convinced myself that it wasn't really you. That I was delusional, and I was seeing what I wanted to see. There are a lot of men out there named Will Graham. I figured you were someone else entirely. It made me feel better. But then you took off your shirt and told me that stupid joke...you've told me that joke before. Word for word, about five years ago."

"Dammit." Will laughed despite himself. It was such a morbid yet hilarious situation. He'd turned himself into a blank slate, and he was completely starting over with someone he'd thought was a stranger. They had a history, one full of personal intimacy and attraction and hatred and love, but only one of them remembered any of it. He'd warped his mind so badly that he'd forgotten eight months of his life. That was a massive amount of time. It was time that he needed to try to get back.

"It might be the worst joke I've ever heard."

"That's the point." They both chuckled. "It's meant to distract from the news itself. A lot of people don't take it well."

"I took the news just fine. I did not take the joke well."

Will yawned. "You would have had to let go of that illusion eventually. You would have seen my top surgery scars, or someone would have told you I was trans, and that would've be enough to convince you I was the same person from before."

"Or I would have seen your scar down here." Hannibal ran his fingers along the lower part of Will's torso, making his muscles tense. "What did you tell yourself it was? Did you not go through medical records?"

"My records from that period were left in Italy. When I woke up, I was obviously still recovering, so I knew the wound was recent. I just didn't know what caused it, and I never really looked into it. I figured someone had robbed me. Maybe kidnapped me, done something to my brain. I just...I wanted to go home and forget about it all. I thought I was insane. I thought I'd blacked out and transformed into a different person, and I was just coming back to myself. It was terrifying."

"I'm sure it felt like you'd had a meltdown. A psychological crisis beyond comprehension."

"I should have gone to therapy or something. But I just wanted to go home and move on with my life. I was scared to let that time creep back up on me, because I was scared that I'd done something terrible. I didn't want to know, especially since there was a note from myself that said to leave it alone. If it was bad enough that I would make myself forget, then I didn't want to reverse that."

"It makes sense. You didn't want to risk remembering a traumatic event." Hannibal nodded. "I've locked away many memories. Ones I don't choose to return to,"

"You're lucky that you get to choose. We both are." Will sighed.

"You're going to despise me, once you know the truth. So I'm trying to enjoy this time while I have it."

"I stayed with you in the moment."

"Yes, but you know what they say about hindsight."

"I know that you stabbed me. I'm looking back on it, and I know it happened. But I'm still here." Will inched closer. "I don't know where else to go. I don't think I would want to go anywhere else."

"That's a common theme throughout our time together," Hannibal said. "We're afraid to be near each other, because we each bring out a part of each other that we've never let free before. But we always choose to stay, because we make each other feel good. We feel seen. We feel wanted."

"What do I bring out in you that you're afraid of?"

Hannibal thought about this. "Feeling. Deep, painful feeling."

They stared, barely able to make out each other's eyes in the dark. "What do you want me to do?" Hannibal asked. "I want you to be comfortable."

Will nestled in closer. "I am."

Hannibal started running Will's curls through his fingers. "Then get some rest."

A few hours later, Will began to dream.

He was in a room by himself, strapped down tightly to a cold metal chair. The walls were industrial, shiny like steel, and the space was so vast and empty that he could feel the isolation closing in on him. Something was holding his head in place, and a helmet was resting on top. He could see a multitude of wires on the floor.

Someone turned the lights off, and Will was plunged into blackness. His heart began to pound, and then a bright light started to flash somewhere in front of him. It was blinding, like the headlights of a car, and it started flashing out a code that Will didn't recognize. It was moving so fast, flickering on and off quickly enough to be overwhelming. He couldn't look at it without feeling dizzy, and closing his eyes did nothing against the pervasive brightness.

Nausea rose up inside of him. The light captivated him, and a flush of sickening heat nearly caused him to faint. Things became fuzzy as his eyes rolled into the back of his head, and the last thing he saw was what sat on his legs — he was wearing a jumpsuit, a prisoner's garb. He heard the clanging of metal, and the walls became cell bars.

It's not me, he wanted to shout. *I didn't do this!*

He startled himself awake, mouth hanging open in a half-gasp for air. He remembered the flashing light from earlier, when he'd realized what all had happened to him. But he couldn't remember what it meant, what the context was. What he did know for sure, though, was that Hannibal was the culprit.

He knew this, and he did not move away.

XVIII - The Coffee

Chapter Notes

> So sorry for the delay! I had a big move to another state. I’m so glad to pick up writing again :)

April 22, 2030

The two men didn't surface from their deep sleep until half past noon. They'd had a long night, and Will's body was much too heavy for him to want to get up. The only thing that stirred him from laying in bed forever was the opportunity to learn what had happened between him and Hannibal. He wanted to skim through the memories. He wanted to remember.

Being hungover didn't help his exhaustion, however. The sunshine streaming through the curtains was blinding, and he felt a migraine coming on. He squeezed his eyes shut and rubbed his temples, sighing.

"Are you alright?" Hannibal asked softly. He'd propped himself up on his elbow, looking at him with a sleepy gaze. It made his almond eyes look even more thin.

"Hangover."

"I told you to stick with just one. That brand is much stronger than what they give you here in America."

"I needed it after everything that happened last night." He sat up, wincing as a rush of pain spilled out to surround his brain.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"I definitely can't use the LOOM today. Not with my brain in this state."

"Of course. We don't have to talk at all, if you don't want to."

"I can't ignore everything that's going on." Will reached for the bedside table where he'd placed his phone. He knew that he was about to be overwhelmed with notifications from Molly and Jack, wondering where the hell he had disappeared to this time. He might not be able to come up with an excuse. Once was already tricky enough; twice would be impossible to uphold.

"What are you going to tell your wife?" Hannibal asked. It was a surreal question; Will never expected to be sleeping shirtless beside another man, making up excuses to his wife. He glanced up at Hannibal's face from behind the phone screen, the look in his eyes distracting him from the array of texts with his wife's name on them. Hannibal was much more magnetizing, and Will was drawn to him like a moth to a flame. He had some inescapable urge to be near Hannibal, and that was part of the reason why he believed this entire story. The altered memories made things difficult; Hannibal could easily be manipulating him, making things up to bring him closer, but nothing could explain that urge. Hannibal could alter memories if he wanted, but he couldn't alter the entire brain chemistry, the primal parts of Will that had been written into his genes.

"I don't know," Will said. He looked down at the screen again. Dozens of missed calls and many unread texts from Molly.

You fucking left again?! I didn't hear you leave. Where did you go?

Fuck you Jack says you're not at work. Where did you sneak off to?

I can't believe you. What am I supposed to tell my son? That his second father figure is going insane, or cheating on me? This is your responsibility. Come home and fucking talk to me.

You need to learn some fucking respect. Do you know what this is doing to the people you care about? You'd better have a damn good excuse for this, or we are done. I can't do this anymore.

Where are you? I'm worried about you. Just tell me where you are, or that you're okay. I can be mad after that.

Will? You turned off your location. Or something's wrong with your phone.

Where are you? Will, please come back. We need to talk about everything without fighting.

Will narrowed his eyes. "I don't think I turned my location off."

"I did," Hannibal said without shame. At Will's offended glare, he continued, "It's your fault. Is your password really four zeroes? In this day and age?"

Will sighed. "I'm not the FBI computer guy. I'm honestly glad you remembered-- it's probably for the better. Don't want anyone finding out where I am."

"This can't go on forever. You need to come up with something to keep everyone off your back. And we need to decide what to do."

"I'll decide what to do once I know the entire story," Will replied. "I want to be myself again. I want to regain what I lost. Then I'll know where I want my life to go."

"I don't know how these things work. I can't promise that you will go back to the person you were. You may remember, but five years can still change a person, memory or not."

"We can try our best."

"Would some food help your hangover?"

"I'll live. You don't have to make anything."

"Cooking is a passion of mine. I love to share it with other people. Let me cook for you."

Will's stomach growled in that moment, and he silently cursed it. Hannibal smirked at the sound. "Fine," Will said. "If it's not any trouble."

"I would be more troubled if you didn't eat. You shouldn't feel like this on an empty stomach, especially since food can help with it." Hannibal extracted himself from the blankets, and Will's eyes were drawn to the skin of his hips and lower back. His abdomen was wide-set and muscular, and when he sat up he had a pair of love handles that surprised Will in just how human they were. Hannibal was a person. He was a person who was just as vulnerable as the rest of them.

It was almost easier to see him as nonhuman. As a monster who couldn't be stopped. At least then, Will could avoid becoming too attached to him. This feeling that he had now was similar to the ones he'd felt in the beginning, when he'd first shaken Hannibal's hand and believed that he was innocent. Back then, he was drawn to Hannibal's softer qualities, and now he was back to that square one.

Hannibal lent Will a T-shirt, then he slipped on a sweater. "Do you want to go chronologically? Or do you want to start with the most important moments?"

"Go chronologically. But skip all the irrelevant bits." He followed Hannibal into the kitchen, where Hannibal began to brew coffee. "I just want to know the events that changed things between us. What made me this way. What was bad enough to lead to that final night."

"Right. We can start with events that are less emotionally charged. Things that we don't need the LOOM for, since I don't think either of us are equipped." Hannibal knelt down in front of one of the cabinets, pulling out a pan. "Also, you're going to have to come up with something to tell your wife."

"I don't want to think about that right now."

"You'll have to. If you're reported missing, and then you're found spending time with me, that's not going to look great."

"They're not going to think you kidnapped me. Maybe you've been proven innocent, and now we've resolved our differences and we're best friends now."

"I'm not going to be the one to come up with ideas for you. This is your life. You know these people better than I do." Hannibal moved around the kitchen as he spoke. "You can't start missing work, though."

"Ah, shit." Will groaned at the thought of work. It was nearly one o'clock, and he hadn't called in. He picked up his phone. "I've got to do something."

"Do you have sick leave?"

"I should. I think with everything that's going on with Molly, I've got an excuse. Give me a minute." He stepped away from the counter, searching for Molly's contact.

"Holy fuck, you asshole. Are you okay?"

"I'm okay."

"Good. But really, you're an asshole. This is the second time in the past week! What the fuck is wrong with you? You told me you were in the dorms, but then Jack said you're not in the

building. And are you going to explain what happened yesterday?"

"I'm not in town, Molly. I'm out at the cabin." The two of them owned a small cabin in the outskirts of the Virginia woods, even more remote than Will's previous house had been. He loved taking vacations there, being reminded of a nice secluded life before moving into Molly's house.

"What the hell are you doing there?"

"I need some time away. I think my mind needs a break from everything. Something is going on, and I'm scared. Yesterday was...I was hallucinating. I thought that he was there with me."

"Is this all because of the LOOM?" Molly's voice became even more nervous. "Do you think it's causing bad side effects? What do we need to do?"

"I want to take some time to myself, and then we can figure out what to do from there. You can spend time with Wally. You can relax a little bit. I'm gonna call Jack and get the week off of work."

"Will..." Molly was silent for a long time. She was choosing her next words carefully. "Are you worried?"

"...I don't know. I don't think so. Not yet, anyway."

"Do you promise to call me?" The words sent sharp remorse through his heart. He felt terrible for lying to her.

"I'll call you. Frequently. And you can call me."

"Okay. Do you have enough clothes? When did you pack? I can call in groceries for you, or any kind of delivery--"

"That's okay, Molly. I'll be alright. Thank you."

"Love you, Will."

Will turned around, watching as Hannibal engaged with something on the stove. His hair was tousled, and he looked out of place in such a simple sweater.

"...Love you too," he said, and then he hung up. Jack was the next call, and that somehow filled him with even more dread.

He was just as irritated as Will expected. "Will. What the hell? Where are you?"

"Morning, Jack." Will didn't have to feign the exhaustion in his voice. "Look, I've got a problem. Something is going really, really wrong with me. I think I'm having a breakdown from stress."

"What, with the Ripper situation? Don't tell me you've been stalking Hannibal anymore."

"I've been up all night. I just woke up. I've started hallucinating, and I did some shit that Molly is really unhappy about. I need to get away."

Jack sighed. "You didn't tell me things had gotten this bad."

"That's why I disappeared the other night. Things are not right in my head. Please, Jack, I just need a small break. I think I'm gonna go out of town, out to my cabin."

"Will, we're making progress on getting Chilton to crack. We need you here to connect the dots."

Will felt a flush of guilt at the thought of Chilton. An innocent man was in jail because Will had apparently had sex with the guilty party. "I can't, Jack. Just...just give me until next Monday. Please."

Jack paused. "Fine," he finally said. "You signed the waiver for the LOOM, Will. You knew what you were getting into. We can help you out with the symptoms, but a civil suit isn't going to work--"

"I don't need a civil suit," Will snapped. "That's not what's happening. At least, I don't think so. I just need a break."

"Communicate with your wife. Please. She keeps contacting me, and she's really worried about you."

"I know. I already have."

"Stay safe, Will. Hope to see you soon."

"Thanks, Jack."

Back in the kitchen, Hannibal set a mug of coffee down in front of him. "Dash of milk, dash of sugar," he said. "That's how you liked it back then. I ordered the same brand that I used to make in Italy." He smirked. "A couple weeks ago. There was a part of me that was hoping it would bring you back."

Will picked it up. "Maybe it still could. It'll be just like old times," he noted.

"Just like old times." Hannibal nodded. "Memories are inextricably connected to our senses. I hope this helps some."

Will inhaled the scent of the coffee. Please work. Please bring me back. Even if it's something small. He brought the rim up to his mouth, and he blew on the drink before taking a sip.

Flavors exploded on his tongue, the creaminess of the milk and the earthy taste of the coffee and the hint of sweetness that lingered at the base of his tongue when he swallowed. He felt the heat of it open up his lungs, and the sun streamed in from his dining room window to warm his left arm and cheek.

The sun. The window. There was no window in this kitchen. Where was the sun coming from?

He opened his eyes. He was somewhere else entirely, and Hannibal was sitting across from him at a small dining table. The smell of something savory drifted upwards towards his nose, and when he looked down he saw a half-eaten plate of breakfast. A mug of steaming coffee was still in his hands, and his body moved to take another sip against his will. The taste was familiar.

"I would apologize for my analytical ambush," Hannibal said, "but I know I will soon be apologizing again, and you will tire of that eventually, so I have to consider using apologies sparingly."

"Just keep it professional." Will's body was still moving against his own volition. He was taking a bite of food, looking up at Hannibal, seeing that face in a much different light than he had five years ago. Hannibal was not his name back then. At least, it wasn't the one he was using. Will knew that now.

"Or we could socialize like adults. God forbid we become friendly." Will detected quite a bit of bite in his tone. Hannibal took a bite of his own food.

Will was feeling two conflicting things; his past and present selves were colliding in their opinions. He could sense the emotions he'd gone through back then -- the resentment, the annoyance, the wish for him to go away -- but he could also tune back into himself and realize how important this first meeting had really been.

"I don't find you that interesting." Will took another sip of coffee. The memory became more and more vivid with each taste.

Hannibal paused, taking a moment to study him. "You will."

You will. You will. You--

"Will?"

Will snapped back into reality, nearly dropping the mug in his hands. "Fuck. No, fuck, it was working." He frantically slurped up more of the coffee, but it didn't work this time. He couldn't access the memory again.

"What did you see?" Hannibal seemed unfazed by all of this, still putting the final touches on the food he was preparing. He was intrigued, if anything.

"We were — you came to my house. In Italy. And you made me breakfast. With the coffee."

"Yes. Right after our first meeting. Pazzi wanted you to work on the Il Mostro case, but he was afraid of putting you through it without proper supervision. So he hired me to coach you."

"Il Mostro. Yes." Will nodded. "Was everything just hiding behind a cup of coffee? Could I have always been that close to remembering everything?"

"I doubt it. I think that your memories have come back to you in full, but you're struggling to retrieve them. That's much different from before, when they were probably gone altogether."

"But…that's not how that works. You can't just erase entire chunks of memory from the human mind and then somehow make them materialize again. When they're wiped, they

should be wiped for good. The brain can't bring them back like they've been stored in the Cloud or something."

"Maybe the Proto-MED instead worked as a suppressor. It buried those memories so far back in your brain that there was no way you could remember them. Like severely repressed memories from trauma victims. They were stored in there like you were a sleeper agent, completely unaware of them."

Hannibal let the words sink in as he doled out that same breakfast from the memory onto two plates. Will felt a sickening jolt of deja vu.

"That's terrifying," he said.

"But it explains why you were so quick to warm up to me now. You knew the truth about me, and you were so willing to keep it to yourself. You began to show signs of your self from five years ago rather fast. The delight in the darkness, the need to go deeper to see just how beautiful things could get. It took months for you to become that way in Italy. Here, it took days, since your brain had already been through that change once."

"I want to know how that change took place the first time. Those are the main memories I'm concerned about."

"Let's fix the hangover," Hannibal said, handing Will his plate, "and then we can continue. Were you able to figure things out with your wife? And Jack?"

"We probably have until next Monday. I'll have to sneak into my house and get some things when Molly's gone, and then I'll just sleep in my car."

"You're not sleeping in your car. You're sleeping here." Hannibal proclaimed it like it was irrefutable truth. "I insist."

"I don't want to just barge in—"

“I lost you for five years. I’m asking you to barge in.” A fleeting glance, filled for a split second with pure need. “We can do this in much less than a week, probably. And then we can figure out where to go from there.”

Will much preferred the idea of the warm bed to his car, but he worried about getting too attached. What was he going to do at the end of the week? Could he even think about turning around and going home to Molly, acting like none of this had ever happened? Could he go back to work and forever hold the secret that he was no better than the killers he searched for?

He pushed the thoughts away. He needed to focus on the present.

“Okay,” he said.

XIX - The Brain

Chapter Notes

> So sorry about the sporadic updates. I want to get back into a regular writing schedule but the new school year has been pretty heavy on the workload and life balance. Here's a longer chapter for you guys hehe

! Brief SA event here in this chapter !

April 22, 2030

"The Monster of Florence," Hannibal said, untangling the cords from around the LOOM helmets, "is me. You didn't know that at the time, however."

It was now the evening, and both of them had been given hours to recover. Will was feeling like himself again, and he decided he was ready to use the LOOM again. It was worth the risk; the memories that came from it were much more vivid. They were addicting, beautiful, and they helped him understand more about Hannibal's mind. He wanted to know what Hannibal really thought -- he was tired of that facade that the man always put on. That stoicism was not helping him trust Hannibal.

He hadn't learned much, in the grand scheme of things. They had only talked about trivial things, like how the two of them had met and Will's relationship with Pazzi. This was the first mention of murder, of true identity.

"I figured," Will replied. "You were hiding in plain sight."

"It was a perfect ruse, being hired to help you with the case." Hannibal shrugged. "But you're a brilliant man, Will. Too brilliant for your own good. I had to do something about it." He avoided Will's gaze, handing him his own helmet. "I could tell that you would eventually

discover me. It wouldn't be long before you realized your profile matched me perfectly. Even if I changed my methods, you would figure me out."

"What did you do to stop me, then?" Will was pretty sure he had an idea, from the brief visions that had crossed his mind, but he wanted to hear Hannibal admit to it. He wanted to find out how, after all of these terrible things, they still ended up together in this intimate, poisonous ceremony.

"I didn't do anything. Or, at least, I didn't set off the chain of events. I had nothing to do with that." Hannibal finally sat, putting on his helmet and glancing over at Will expectantly. "You got sick."

Will looked into his eyes and put on his own helmet. "Show me."

Hannibal had given him tips for entering the LOOM's clutches: act like you're going to sleep, he'd said, and try not to think about what's actually happening. Will followed those orders, and moving into Hannibal's mind was much easier with that assistance. Maybe it was that, or maybe it was his acceptance of Hannibal that brought them closer together. Maybe it was a bit of both.

Inside, rather than appearing in the hallway, Will found himself in the cushioned chair by the fire. Hannibal was standing over him, shadows cast over his face, offering him a cup of tea.

"You may need some background information."

Will took the cup, and when Hannibal stepped away he felt a flush of warmth on his face. He heard faint raindrops hitting the glass roof.

"Viral encephalitis." Hannibal took a sip of tea. "Inflammation of the brain, often caused by a viral or bacterial infection. Usually causes memory loss, confusion, amnesia, personality changes, and often death if left untreated."

"Sounds pretty bad." Will stared down at the dark liquid, watching it ripple as he spoke down into the cup.

"Well, you survived it, so you're stronger than it. Your brain persevered, and you're still here."

"Damn. My brain's been through a lot." Will frowned. "Makes me wonder if I can trust myself anymore. If I can trust my train of thought."

"You are still brilliant. That aspect of your mind never changed. And I don't think many of the changes were permanent."

"Many? As in, you think some remain?"

"It's hard to pinpoint whether you've made a full recovery. Unless you've had any brain scans in the past few years."

"Can't say I have. They didn't make me go through that before we used the LOOM. Probably should have." Will took a sip of his tea. He tasted honey and herbs. "What's your opinion? You think I've made a full recovery?"

"I think that the encephalitis made your brain very vulnerable to manipulation. But I don't think it would have made you do anything that you didn't want to do." Hannibal shrugged. "I don't think you're easy to manipulate, not anymore. I don't think that aspect has stuck with you."

"So the way my brain succumbed to you..."

"I don't think that was the encephalitis. I think that was all you. You didn't really start to change until after they had gotten rid of the disease. Do you have epilepsy, Will?"

"No. Not that I know of, at least."

"You would know. That was probably the only effect that would have lasted, and it clearly didn't. So I think you're doing just fine."

"Elaborate on what happened. You wouldn't bring it up if it wasn't important."

Hannibal set down his cup of tea and stood. "You caught encephalitis. I'm still not entirely sure how. You were having extreme issues, and I knew what it was, but I didn't do anything about it."

Will took a final long sip, feeling the warmth of the drink running down his throat. "I don't need to see that."

"You don't have any qualms about what I just said?"

"You don't surprise me. Not anymore." He also got up from his chair, following Hannibal into the palace's grand hall. The interior seemed smaller now, as if learning Hannibal's secrets had limited his power. "I had a dream about it last night. The encephalitis."

"Did you, now?"

"I remembered a bright, flashing light. Feeling powerless and sick. And then being in a jail cell, yelling that I was innocent. It was mainly a bunch of flashing images, but the idea was all I needed."

"And you didn't leave my house right after you woke up?"

"Where else would I have gone, Hannibal? Really?" Will glared up at him. "You've ruined everywhere else for me. At least you have the balls to admit to what you've done now."

"I did what was necessary to protect myself. If I hadn't framed you, then I would have been the one in that jail cell." Hannibal didn't seem ashamed; he truly believed that he had done the right thing. "No matter what, you discovered who I was. You were going to say something about it, whether you were in jail or not. The easiest way to go about things was to make sure no one believed you when you told them."

"So you twisted my mind to make me completely unbelievable."

"You were losing large bouts of time and memory. For one of the murders, you had no alibi. No memory of that night at all, and there were multiple pieces of evidence against you."

"That you planted."

"Yes. It was just the icing on the cake, so to speak. The lack of alibi probably would have been enough, but I sped up the process. The murder of Mason Verger only made things worse."

Will narrowed his eyes. "Don't think I recognize the name."

"Perhaps you should see, then." The door that they stopped in front of was battered, the wood around the knob splintered. Will could see the faint outline of a shoe print at waist level. "One of the main suspects in the Il Mostro case, before things started turning towards you and me, was a tycoon named Mason Verger. He was a major producer in the pork industry, which was rather important in Italy. He'd come to Florence on a business trip, and that's right about when the murders began. We were instructed to go ask him a few questions." Hannibal stepped aside, gesturing for Will to lead the way. "You'll see what happened."

Will pushed the door open, not needing to turn the broken knob. He stepped inside, feeling his essence enter Hannibal's body, and he was sucked into a memory.

"*Mason Verger?" Will Graham knocked on the Vergers' door, impatiently pacing up and down the porch. "We've just got a few questions for you."*

There was still no answer. They'd been waiting outside the Verger Italian mansion for a while, and there were plenty of cars in the driveway. There had to be someone home. It wasn't a language issue; Will and Hannibal both knew that Mason spoke English.

"Shady billionaires don't have a lot of camaraderie with the police," Hannibal said. "We might need a more direct approach."

As he spoke the words, both of them heard a shrill yelp ring out from somewhere inside the house. Will didn't hesitate; he immediately rushed for the door, banging his foot near the knob. It took a few kicks for the door to give, but when it did, Will climbed over the splintered wood and rushed inside. He fumbled for the blade inside of his pocket, holding it in his fist as he inspected the doorways around him.

"Step back, Doctor Fell," Will called over his shoulder. "Call Pazzi. Mason Verger! Police!"

Hannibal refused to step back. Whatever was happening here, he wanted to see it. He hadn't made that phone call for nothing. He kept running forward, hearing the stifled yelps and thuds getting closer.

Will kicked in the door to the bedroom, which was large and dark. The walls were a deep maroon, and Hannibal could hear the sounds of a struggle. Hannibal peered over Will's shoulder, catching a glimpse of a horrified woman lying prone on the floor. Her mouth was open in shock, and a man was kneeling on the floor a few feet away from her. Hannibal recognized his face.

"You just missed him!" Mason cried out, his face more full of anger than fear. "Some crazy bastard just broke in here and came after my sister!"

The woman's mouth bobbed open and closed silently. Hannibal saw that her wrists were strung through zip ties, but they hadn't been tightened yet. It was a half-assed job, unfinished. Will went to her, helping her up into a sitting position and freeing her.

"Someone came in here?" Hannibal asked Mason, trying to take up his attention. He needed Will and Margot to be alone for a minute. He needed her to give Will the truth, even if it was silent. He'd planned for this, and he wanted it to go well.

"You heard me," Mason spat. "I just got home. Caught some crazy masked man in here, speaking Italian and trying to get Margot to tell him where all our money was being kept. Tried to assault her. You're a second too late, policia. I chased him off--"

Mason didn't get the chance to finish his sentence before Will sprung towards him, tackling him to the floor. Both men grunted with the impact, and Will held his blade up to Mason's neck.

"You think we're that stupid?" He hissed through clenched teeth. "You think--"

Mason wrung his hands around Will's neck, kneeing him in the stomach. The men rolled around on the floor, shoving each other and trying to wrangle the knife away. Hannibal, not wanting to see Will irreparably hurt, tried to pull Mason off of him by the waist, but Mason slipped away. He ran towards Will, eyes narrowed in rage, and Will instinctually thrust his arm forwards.

The blade sunk through Mason's sternum. The sharp end pierced through flesh and muscle with a wet slithering noise, and everyone in the room froze. There was an eerie silence, and a small trail of dark blood began to stain Mason's shirt.

Will stared at Mason for a long time, unblinking. A myriad of emotions soared behind those blue eyes of his, and Hannibal wanted more than anything to be inside his head at that moment. He remembered his first murder. He remembered the euphoria, the power, that came with it. He would give anything to feel it again for the first time, and he envied Will for it.

Will yanked the blade out of the wound. It was exactly what you weren't supposed to do; either Will wasn't thinking, or he had done it on purpose to speed up Mason's death. No matter the intent, the trickle of blood became a stream, and Mason fell to the ground. Will stood over him, his chest moving rapidly up and down. Margot was still on the floor, except now she was scurrying towards the corner of the room, gasping in pure shock.

"Will." Hannibal reached for him. "Will, are you alright?"

Will didn't speak. Specks of blood dotted his glasses.

"Will?"

Will, regaining some of his agency, took advantage of the chaos to tear away from the scene in front of him. He stepped out of Hannibal's body and backed away, reentering the hallway of the palace shaken but undamaged.

"I killed him," he said. "That's what started it all."

"Yes. And at the time, you knew me as Doctor Roman Fell."

Will stared at the closed door, wondering how things would have been different if he had kept the knife in Mason's chest. He himself didn't know his true intent behind taking it out — it wouldn't be like him to forget his basic first aid training. Taking the blade out was a rookie mistake. He wondered if he'd done it on purpose. If he'd reveled in it.

If he'd found out something so vile that it made Mason's death worth it.

"You knew something about her." The thought hadn't left his mind ever since the word Margot passed over Hannibal's. "Margot. You knew her secret before any of us said it."

"I knew a lot more about the Vergers than I was letting on. I had a plan in mind from the moment I found out what Mason was doing."

"How'd you figure that stuff out?"

"We aren't finished yet." Hannibal took Will's hand. "It's easier to just show you."

He led Will to the next door, this one being the exact same as the first one but intact. It hadn't been kicked in yet. "This is the night before what I just showed you. I went to go see Mason Verger."

Will lingered before entering, not wanting to let go of Hannibal's hand.

Nighttime was quickly approaching, and Hannibal had just gotten off of work. He'd spent the afternoon researching Mason Verger and his legacy, working alongside Will Graham to see if he matched the Il Mostro profile. Obviously, he didn't — the only one who could perfectly match the profile was Hannibal himself. But no one else knew that yet, not even Will.

No one knew what he was up to tonight.

He circled the Verger mansion, peering inside of every first-floor window from the bottom corner. He wanted to lay eyes on Mason, wanted to see his reaction to the news he was about to deliver. Mason surely wasn't guilty of the murders, but there must have been something else he was guilty of. At least, Hannibal hoped so. That would be a lot more interesting.

He found luck with the kitchen windows. Mason stood at the island, leaning against the marble with a smug demeanor. Everything about him was smug, it seemed, and it fit the narrative of him being an ultra-wealthy heir. He spoke down to a woman who was standing right across from him, who Hannibal recognized as Margot Verger. The sister. She'd come up in their research today.

They were arguing with each other over something. Hannibal didn't think much of it at first — siblings fought, what about it — until their bodies clearly grew tenser and their shouting louder. Hannibal watched intently, and he wasn't surprised when Mason latched out to slap Margot hard in the face. Margot flinched to the side, and Mason took advantage of her weakness to pin her against the kitchen island. She cried out in pain as the hard surface collided with her hips, but he just pushed her down farther and made sure she was powerless against the counter. His hands traced the waistband of her skirt, and he began to pull it down —

Disgusted, Hannibal couldn't stand to watch any more. He quickly pulled out the burner phone he'd purchased, dialing the number he and Will had found in the office today. Inside, Mason froze, and then he sighed and pulled away from his sister. She ran away as fast as she could, hopefully to a room with a locked door.

"Hello?" Mason sounded extremely annoyed when he answered the phone. Hannibal was just glad he answered an unknown number.

"Mister Verger?" Hannibal ducked away from the window, speaking softly. "You don't know me, and I suspect we'll never meet. This is a courtesy call. I need you to listen very carefully."

There was silence on the other end. Hannibal waited.

"Are you listening?"

A faint "yes" on the other end. Hannibal nodded.

"They know. And you can expect a visit from the police tomorrow afternoon."

He didn't wait for Mason's response before hanging up. He wasn't interested in it.

He hadn't expected to see what he saw. He hadn't even approached the house with the intention to stop Mason — he had no idea what Mason got up to. He could have been innocent, for all Hannibal knew. Truly, his primary intention was to shake the man up. To ruin the police's plan to sneak up on him, catch him off guard. He wanted to see what a desperate man would do when confronted by the police. He wanted to see what Will would do if faced with an aggressive, fearful suspect.

The fact that Mason was guilty of something only made things better. It upped the chances of him lashing out.

Hannibal didn't really have a reason for any of this. He was simply curious what would happen.

"Clearly, Mason was the one with the zip ties that day." In the present day, Hannibal spoke to Will, nearly startling the life out of him. Will spun to look at the man. "He thought he could tie Margot up and put her in the attic so she couldn't tell the police anything that he'd been doing to her. At least, that's what she told us after the fact. I'm inclined to believe her."

"Is that what you wanted her to tell me? You wanted her to finally tell the truth?"

"Yes. I wanted Mason exposed. I wanted to help her."

"You helped her that night," Will said, "but you also could have gotten her killed. What if he'd tried to silence her in an even worse way?"

Hannibal just shrugged at that. "I figured it wasn't likely. Mason isn't a complete fool. That would only make things more suspicious on his part. And he wouldn't give up the power he had over Margot."

"If you hadn't made that damn phone call, he wouldn't have been so angry. He wouldn't have had the chance to lash out like that. And I wouldn't have fucking killed him."

"I know." Hannibal turned around, finished with the memory. "There's a reason I made it."

"Did you want to see me kill someone?"

"I was curious if you would. You didn't have to do it. You could have easily taken another way out. You didn't have to stab him in that place. You didn't have to tackle him. That was all you."

Will closed his eyes; Hannibal was right. He wished that there wasn't such a massive disconnect between himself now and himself in the past — he wanted to understand his thought processes then. It seemed like he took every dangerous move on purpose, like he wanted to provoke Mason enough to make his death justified.

It really was disgusting, what Mason did. Maybe, upon hearing it, Will couldn't hold back anymore. People didn't just randomly kill, they had it building up inside of them, and Will most definitely had been building it up. He thought back to the boy he'd beaten half to death in his childhood, shuddering at what he'd become now.

"So this happened," Will said, following Hannibal out of the memory, "and then I got sick?"

"You were having headaches before then, so I think you already had it. But it got much worse after Mason. You began to hallucinate and lose time."

"I'm sure it was a major stressor."

"Yes. But you also told me that you enjoyed killing him. That you enjoyed the feeling of pulling the blade from his heart."

"Mason was the catalyst for this." He pointed to himself and then Hannibal. "For us."

"You were the catalyst. I was the catalyst. Mason was just a prick." Hannibal smiled spitefully. "The only one responsible for your Becoming was you, Will. Remember that."

He squeezed Will's hand.

XX - The Feast

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

April 22, 2023

"What did you think of me when you first met me?"

The rest of the afternoon and evening had been uneventful. Will had had enough of messing with his mind, and he wanted a break. Hannibal cooked dinner, more chicken -- Will wasn't sure if he trusted Hannibal to feed him red meat just yet -- and the two ate at the candlelit dining table. They were seated at the corner of the table, adjacent from each other, the two closest chairs they could have chosen and still see the other's face.

"In Italy," Will continued, taking a sip of wine. He typically wasn't a wine drinker, but he found himself enjoying it more and more. "Did you know from the start that you were going to frame me?"

"No. I wanted to get to know you better. Something about you was...very appealing." Hannibal licked his lips. "I thought that you had a lot of potential."

"Potential for?"

"Your empathy makes you vulnerable. I saw you immerse yourself in a crime scene, taking on the point of view of the killer. It made me wonder if you could ever see the same thing in me."

"Clearly, I did."

"I've never been understood before. The thought that I could finally find someone who did was intoxicating."

"I do understand. I understand so vividly. So clearly." Will stared at him. The delicious food was forgotten by the irresistible draw of the chef. "I've seen things through your eyes, quite literally. That's more than anyone else will ever get."

"The LOOM was a very rare gift, in that case." Hannibal smiled. "Perhaps Italy wasn't your final step. Perhaps fate and circumstance wanted us to carry on to this moment."

"It kept me alive so I could live to see things from your point of view."

"I want to have dinner with you, Will."

"We are."

"A real dinner." Hannibal reached over to take Will's hand. "With real meat."

Will inhaled. "You want to bring me a victim. Like a satisfied dog bringing squirrels to its master."

"Normally I would be offended at the comparison. But when it comes to you, then yes. That's the closest metaphor to how I feel about you."

"Have I...'had dinner' with you before?"

"Yes. A few times. Once of your own making." Hannibal's eyes gleamed with pride. "You brought me a squirrel in your own teeth."

"Did you have something to do with it?"

"Maybe. Does that matter in the long run, though? I sent him after you, yes, but there were many ways to take care of it. You didn't have to slaughter him the way you did. He was utterly mangled."

"You sent him after me?"

"Yes." Hannibal nodded. "I wasn't worried about you. I knew that you would protect yourself, one way or another."

"He could have killed me."

"Oh, no, he wouldn't have." Hannibal seemed almost amused at the idea. "If I wanted that, I would have sent practically anyone else. He was young, inexperienced. Much less trained than you."

"Your trained pup." Will pressed his lips together in thought. "Did I ruin the meat?"

"No. You made it easier for me to access." He picked up Will's hand, examining the knuckles. "See that?" He pointed to a specific spot on Will's left middle finger, right where the finger met the back of the hand. The skin there was slightly mottled, scarred so subtly that you wouldn't see it unless you knew what you were looking for. He traced it lightly with the tip of his own finger. "You got a little roughed up. But I took care of you."

Will felt the air shift little by little. He felt powerful. "And did I get a reward?"

"Obviously." Hannibal lightly kissed the scar on Will's knuckle. "That was the night we had sex."

Will's heart rate picked up. "I'm sure it was something special."

"You ate every bite of that dinner." He gripped Will's hand tightly, closing his eyes. "Oh, Will--"

Will stood suddenly from his chair, rattling the dishes on the table. He stood over Hannibal and stared down at him with a clenched jaw. "You've spent years thinking about me. Why?"

"How could I not?" His pupils were large, nearly swallowing his brown irises. "That brain of yours is eating me whole. You're fucking *captivating*."

Will took notice of Hannibal's hips, the way that he shifted backwards in his chair to hide something. "Stand up."

Hannibal did. When they were at the same level, Will reached down to fumble with Hannibal's belt. Hannibal didn't object; he helped Will out, sliding it out of the loops of his pants and throwing it on the ground. Will pulled Hannibal's pants down and reached into his underwear, grabbing hold of his cock that was rapidly becoming erect.

"Will--"

"What else is a hound supposed to do," Will hissed in his ear, "than please his master."

"You're the one with the leash now."

"Yes. Stay still. You're not going anywhere." He wrapped his other arm around Hannibal and pulled him close, pinning Hannibal so that his head was resting on Will's shoulder. Will tilted his head and began to mutter in his ear. "You're mine, Lecter."

"Where is this coming from?" Hannibal grit his teeth as Will slowly rubbed his thumb up and down his cock.

"You're twisting my mind. I get your body. Besides, I've been craving you since the moment I remembered that night we had. Since the moment my wife turned into an image of you."

"You were always meant to be with me. You're *mine*." He circled Will's waist with his arm, holding onto him tightly. "You're mine, Will. Not hers."

"Oh, no. *You're* mine." He began to let go, to slink his hand outside of Hannibal's waistband. "I can easily stop. Whenever I want."

"*No*." Hannibal grabbed his wrist. "No, don't."

"Yeah, that's right. You're begging for it, aren't you?" Will stuck his hand back in. He stroked Hannibal up and down, and he used his other arm to hold tightly onto the back of Hannibal's neck. He scrunched up the skin, feeling it pinched between his fingers. He was sure it stung, but Hannibal didn't seem affected by it. "Now, I told you to stay still. Don't make me do it again."

He picked up his pace, rubbing his hand up and down Hannibal's cock. Hannibal grunted with pleasure.

"Will--"

"You're going to make up for what you did to me. And for lost time." He took Hannibal's earlobe in his teeth, nipping him before speaking again. "We're going to relive that night."

"We already are." Hannibal had a hint of smugness in his voice behind the breaths of excitement. "This is exactly what I did to you back then."

Will let out a cry of frustration. Nothing was his own anymore. He couldn't do anything without being reminded of the past. He may not ever again. His brain was subconsciously recreating everything, and Hannibal was the only one aware of it. This conversation could have been the exact same, word for word, and Will wouldn't have a clue.

"Do you even want me?" Will asked. "Or do you want the person I was back then? Are you only happy because we're recreating things?"

"You're much different now. Don't think that you aren't." Hannibal thrust his hips against Will's. "All I said was that you did this to me. The difference between that night and this one is that you're the one with the power now. I guided you all those years ago. Now you're guiding me." Will felt his smile against the skin of his neck. "I like this much better."

"I learned your name that night."

"You did."

"That's not my name. Not my real one," Roman said softly into his ear.

"I wondered if that was the case. Tell me what it is."

"Hannibal. Hannibal Lecter."

"Good to finally meet you. Now, I've got a secret to tell you."

Hannibal had been strangely accepting of his scars. He didn't seem to see Will any differently. Will was glad for that.

"Is it my turn now?" Hannibal asked. "After what I did to you?"

"It would be your turn. It should be. But I don't have the parts you need. This thing is a little too big, and I haven’t ever tried anal without a strap before.”

"I bought something for you. Something I thought you would like."

"A strap?"

"If it makes you uncomfortable, that's fine. No skin off my back."

"It doesn't. I've used them; I have a wife. I'm just surprised you bought one for me."

"Had it delivered. Once you started remembering me, I went a little crazy. It was an impulse purchase."

"Well, thank God for your impulses."

"Do you want to use it on me?"

"Oh, I will. Within an inch of your life." Will squeezed the skin on his neck harder, feeling his nails digging in. He hoped Hannibal bled. "I've got a lot of emotions about you. You've got to let me get them out."

"I don't care if you kill me," Hannibal sighed. "It would be a good way to go."

"Come on, then."

The two of them fumbled over each other to get to the bedroom, sneaking in rough kisses along the way. They couldn't stay off of each other. Will knew that this was just an outburst of emotion from him, a way to cope with everything that was going on and somehow regain a semblance of control, but he didn't care. He wanted to see Hannibal go weak underneath him. It was the only thing that would make him feel better.

Once they were on the bed and stripped naked, Hannibal placed his hand on Will's bare chest. "One moment," he said, sliding off the bed and going to the closet. He brought the strap out, along with a bottle of lube. Will smirked at the sight of it.

"Good choice," he said. It was simple, true to real life.

"Put it on. See if it works."

He did, and he did it slowly. He wanted to watch Hannibal thrust with desire, becoming impatient. The harness wrapped around his hips, and part of it settled right on where his clit now was. It felt good, and he knew that once they began to use it it would feel even better. When he had it on, he leisurely rubbed lube on it, fine to make Hannibal wait.

Hannibal watched him. He was nearly drooling. "Do you want to stretch me, or should I?"

"You do it. You don't get me until you're completely ready."

Hannibal obeyed. He worked much faster than Will had, clearly desperate, but also more experienced. "Please."

Will straddled him. Hannibal opened his legs, muscled thighs pressing against Will's body, and the two of them guided the toy inside Hannibal. Hannibal grunted, tensing and then relaxing.

"There you go. Don't be nervous. Move all you want."

Will began to grind against him, feeling himself move in and out of Hannibal. It felt wonderful to have a cock of his own, to deliver something to Hannibal that made him feel weak. He heard Hannibal moaning underneath him, Will's name frequently escaping his lips in a desperate cry.

"I bet you're loving this," Will said. "This is just what you wanted."

"Come closer."

Will did. "Yeah, you want me close to you? You want it further in?"

"I want this." Hannibal suddenly reached up to grab the sides of the strap, fingers searching for something on the harness. Will heard something click, and the next thing he knew he was moaning out in surprise, his body going weak as the strap began to vibrate heavily against his clit, the base of his phalloplasty. He fell on top of Hannibal, who was smiling and moving to get the toy as far inside of himself as possible. The farther it got inside, the more it pressed up against Will's clit, and he began to shake as the pleasure travelled all the way up to his stomach and across his thighs.

"You motherfucker," Will groaned. He let himself grind against Hannibal, against the toy, and that provided some relief. He moved the now vibrating toy in and out of Hannibal, and finally Hannibal gasped in pleasure. He'd hit a good spot. Will thrusted to hit it again. Again. Again.

They'd both broken into a sweat. Annoyed with Hannibal's trickery and stuck in the heat of the moment, Will grabbed Hannibal's neck and began to squeeze. Hannibal smiled, like this was what he wanted all along.

He watched Hannibal writhe underneath him, gasping for air and letting out squeaks of pleasure as Will moved in and out. It was perfect. He closed his eyes, enjoying the moment, and after a while he felt himself letting go. His hands were no longer wrapped around Hannibal's throat, and he felt himself floating -- but then everything changed. The vibration changed, moved downwards into his ass, and he felt delightfully full. He opened his mouth to breathe, but he couldn't; someone was choking him, hovering above him and restricting his airflow. He felt himself begin to panic a bit, but he knew that Hannibal would take care of him. Even if he didn't, it would be a good way to go. That's what Hannibal said, and that's what he thought now, too.

"Hannibal," he rasped, and the sound of his voice shocked him. It wasn't his own. It was more gruff, more accented.

"Will," the person above him moaned. And that -- that was his voice. He would know it anywhere.

He opened his eyes, and he was looking at himself. His brown curls were stuck to his sweaty forehead, and his chest was red and heaving up and down. His scars were hardly noticeable with his blurry vision.

This version of himself opened his eyes, too, and when he saw who was underneath him his eyes widened in panic. Both of them startled, scrambling off of each other, and as he hit the headboard Will's head began to soar above the clouds. He was lighter than air, flying somewhere new, and then his brain began to pound as he slammed into the surface of the bed. He gasped, finally able to breathe again, and when he surfaced he was back in his own body.

Hannibal was breathing heavily at the other side of the bed, his neck still red from the imprints of Will's hands. Will hit the switch on the toy, unhooking it and throwing it to the edge of the bed. Both of them were soaked, messy, terrified.

"What the fuck?" Will said. "What the *fuck* was that?!"

"You saw that?" Hannibal slowly sat up, wincing. He must have been sore. "I was you, and..."

"I was you." Will's heart raced. "We switched."

"How? How is that even possible?"

"It's the LOOM." Will looked at him with wide eyes. "I read about this. This happened, and the FBI tried to erase it from the records because it looked too bad. It happened in Italy."

"What happened?"

"Pazzi told me about it." He blinked.

"These...they're instruments. Given to us by the FBI for us to test. They're too scared to test it on their own people."

"And what are you getting for it?"

"Funding. Military protection." Pazzi placed his hand on one of the gadgets; it was a helmet, attached to another one by an intricate set of wires. "This one is about to be sent out to America. It lets one person enter another person's mind."

"Like, completely?" Will raised an eyebrow.

"Yes. It's dangerous, though. We've only used it on one person." Pazzi frowned. "We told the FBI what happened, but since both parties are still alive they don't care. They want to use them on prisoners, anyway. Who they consider the lesser kind."

"Still alive after what? What happened?"

"We had a detective enter the mind of a man in prison here. It worked well. He was able to see all kinds of things that the prisoner had not yet told us." Pazzi shook his head. "But...something happened to them. They began to act differently, both of them did. The prisoner showed signs of multiple personalities, and the detective began to fade."

"Were they combining into one person?"

"It seems so."

"Where are they both now?"

"They're both in psychiatric facilities. One went mute, the other went insane and tried to kill himself. Good and evil converging in one body and fighting each other until the body nearly perished. We've got him sedated now."

"Holy fuck. And the FBI is allowing this?"

"Yes. If it gets them information, they don't care. They're aware of the issue. Maybe the technology will get better, and this won't keep happening. But it's not worth the risk." He looked at WIll sternly. "if you're ever given the chance, don't use it. Don't want anything happening to you."

"No. No, fuck. Oh, shit." Will ran his fingers through his hair, feeling the blood leave his face. He felt light. "We're converging."

"What?"

"Our brains are combining. It's the LOOM." He let out a shaky breath, jaw clenched. "We've started coming together. Our brains don't know how to be apart anymore."

"What does that mean, Will? Calm down. I'm sure it's alright--"

"No, Hannibal," Will snapped. "You don't get it. We've gone too far." He bit his lip. "At this rate, it won't be long before the two of us start to exist in one body. Our minds will combine, and they won't come apart again."

"So we won't be two people anymore?"

"We'll be one person. In one body." He thought back to what Pazzi said. "And I think it's going to be yours."

Chapter End Notes

uh ohhhhh

XXI - The Notes

April 23, 2030

Will woke to the feeling of the mattress shifting beside him. Groggy, he let his eyes peel open, trying to make sense of the blurry numbers on the bedside clock. The room was still dark, and he could tell the time had three digits, but that was about all his brain would let him comprehend.

Hannibal's warm arm draped around him, hugging his chest, and their bodies pressed together. Will closed his eyes again, enjoying the moment.

"I don't remember falling asleep," he said.

"You dissociated," Hannibal replied lowly by his ear. "We had that experience, switching bodies, and you started having a panic attack. I gave you a Valium. You started staring off into space, and then you passed out."

"I'm still feeling it." Will blew out air through his pursed lips. "I'm not all there right now."

"It's half past two. You don't have to be here." Hannibal kissed his neck. "Go back to sleep."

Will focused on the rhythmic rise and fall of Hannibal's chest, the way each exhale sent a stream of air past Will's cheek.

"Hannibal."

"Will."

"I..." Will could hardly keep his eyes open. "I'm scared."

Hannibal stroked his hair. "What scares you?"

"I don't know what this thing is doing to us. I don't want to lose myself. I don't want to go crazy."

"It's going to be okay," Hannibal reassured him. "We'll talk about this in the morning. There's nothing we can do while we're both exhausted and you're still half gone on Valium."

"I know. I can't help it, though."

"We don't have to use it again."

"But I want my memory back. And it's working."

"You'll have to decide what's most important, then, I suppose." Hannibal kissed the back of his neck. "But don't do it now. You need to rest."

Will relaxed and let himself drift off once more.

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"The police are gone."

"Hm?" Will looked up from the book he was skimming. The two of them were pacing around Hannibal's office, with Hannibal desperately pawing through his papers for anything that might bring back Will's memories. Apparently, the two of them had burned all of the notes
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about Will, including the ones they'd written to each other, but Hannibal was convinced he would find something. That, or he just wanted to be helpful. "They're gone?"

"They've stopped camping out in front of the house. They could be farther down the neighborhood, but as far as I can see, they're gone."

"You haven't done anything suspicious." Will shrugged. "And they're certain it's Chilton."

"Has he caved yet?"

"No. All lawyered up. And he won't let anyone use the LOOM."

"Probably for the better." He pulled a pen and paper out from one of the drawers. "Will you humor me with something?"

"Sure."

"Lay it all out for me." Hannibal slid the things across the desk, raising an expectant eyebrow. "Write down everything you may remember. All of it. The things I've told you, and the things I haven't told you. Everything about those few months that's sitting there in your brain. Even if they're disjointed memories, or just images, every little bit helps. Got it?"

"And what is this going to do?"

"I'm beginning to lose track of what you know and what you don't. And there's something I'm curious about. I'll tell you when you're done. Just...humor me."

Will picked up the pen and began to write.

He ran through everything chronologically in his head, trying to mark down every small detail, but the farther along he got the more difficult things became. He wanted to remember something other than the tearing of tissue under a blade, the way that hot and sticky blood had spilled through his fingers. He wanted to feel something other than despair, calling out Hannibal's name as the only person he'd been this intimate with left him behind. He wanted to trust himself, to trust Hannibal, to trust that the world around him was going to treat him right. He was tired of being different. He wanted to be similar to someone.

Nothing about this was good. None of his memories of Hannibal this far were good. They were all based in fear, in pain, in betrayal. It made him wonder what he was still doing here.

"It's all been...I can only remember the bad. That's all that I've learned so far."

"We've gotten past a majority of the terrible things I've done. It's not over, of course; it'll never be over. I could treat you like you were a god, and I think I would still hurt you. I think my existence hurts you." He didn't look up from his own sheet of paper, where he was sketching out the shape of a head. "You don't like knowing that someone like me can exist. Someone who commits terrible acts, gets away with it, enjoys it, and still finds a way to revel in themselves. It goes against everything you stand for."

"I'm different now."

"Of course. But the teachings of the FBI will never really leave you. There will always be a part of you that sticks to those core principles." He glanced up at Will, taking in a detail of his expression, before going back to his sketch. "You've been taught that monsters have no heart. That there is always something wrong with them, and that's why they do what they do. They lack something vital, or they have something they shouldn't, or they hate themselves for what they do but they can't help themselves. When you see monsters in that way, it makes it much easier to have hope."

"You're different in that sense. You were made perfectly. You don't lack anything. You don't have anything you shouldn't. You don't hate yourself." Will stared down at the lines on the paper, watching them blur together. "Do I lack something?"

"No. You have empathy. You have plenty of it. And I wouldn't even say that you're channeling it in the wrong place. There is no wrong place. There are deplorable acts. There

are benevolent ones. The important thing is that you, Will, understand other human beings on a very deep level. So, no. You don't lack anything. You don't have anything you're not supposed to have. And you enjoy that feeling of blood between your fingers. But you force yourself into this idea that you hate it because that's what monsters are supposed to do. And if you're not a saint, and you're not a monster...then what are you?"

"Blood between my fingers." Will smiled humorlessly. "I thought that exact phrase before you said it."

"We're merging."

"But we were always similar. Even before this. Before I met you, in fact."

"Yes. And that scares you. Or at least it did back then." Hannibal blinked slowly. "I think that I've changed you in that sense. You've realized how similar we really are. It scares you to know that I exist, that you have something similar existing inside of you, and that I've opened you up to who you really are."

"That one person can change me so much."

"Yes. And I feel the same way." Hannibal looked up at him for longer this time, admiring him. "You have changed me. You've altered my entire perception of who I thought I was. That scared me for a while, too. I think that's why when you betrayed me, I lashed out."

"But you're not scared of it anymore?"

"No. Because I've learned to love you for it."

Will's heart fell, chambers snapping and sending the elevator shaft plummeting to the ground floor. He felt the rush in his chest. "You...you're saying you love me?"

"If I was, would you believe it?"

"Yes." Will glanced down at Hannibal's paper, the sketch of his own face that was now coming to fruition. He looked beautiful.

"Would you accept it?"

Will hesitated this time. He closed his eyes, still finding it hard to believe this was all real. "It's been years, Hannibal. And there's still so much I don't remember—"

"I'm not asking if you love me back. I'm asking if you would be willing to go about these days with me knowing that I love you. If you'd be comfortable with it, and you'd let me express that love to you. I don't need anything in return but for you to accept my love without feeling like you don't deserve it."

"I'm comfortable with it. And I'm not entirely sure that I don't love you back." Will drew small circles on the paper. "I think that my brain is really, really confused."

"Let me try something else. This is the part I'm curious about." Hannibal flipped his piece of paper over, and Will did the same. "Write down how you feel about everything you remember. Any feeling that's gone through your head at all since you started using the LOOM. Write about how this has affected your emotions, your feelings about me, your feelings about yourself, about Jack, your wife, the world in general. All of it. And I'm not going to be reading this -- we'll burn it after. Just be honest."

When Will picked the pen back up, Hannibal spun around in his chair so his back was to Will. "I'm not going to look. I won't see a word you write. Now, go."

Will did what he asked. He wrote about his festering need for violence, the way that he'd quickly started to see everything as beautiful. The vision of the crime scene in the silo, making his heart swell with joy. There was something so artistic about it, so lovely. He wrote about meeting Hannibal, thinking he was innocent at first, and then feeling so betrayed when he wasn't who he said he was. Moving back and forth between hatred and intrigue, fearing

what he would do to Will's family, but still wishing to get closer and closer. He wouldn't have come to Hannibal's house if he wasn't curious about the doctor's potential.

He'd made that deal with malice in mind, hoping that he could find something to break Hannibal's innocence. He wanted to catch him in the act, get him to admit to something Will could turn him in for. Little did he know, he'd gone through that exact plan before, and it hadn't gone well for him.

So many memories. So many sights and sounds and smells overwhelming him and making him want to collapse with exhaustion. Flooding his head with agonizing pain, sending tears to his eyes with the pressure. Looking at Hannibal for the first time and having this rush of recognition, of relief, of love. Hannibal's name was the only thing running through his head after that epiphany. There was nothing that mattered more.

Now he was wondering if this was the only place he was safe. Here, he could look back at the past without any fear. He didn't have to feel regret. Hannibal encouraged him to think of nothing but the present moment, and in his intoxicating presence, Will didn't have any other choice.

He wrote for a long time, and when he set the pen down his wrist was aching. "Okay."

"I'm still not going to look. But I have a list of my own, and I want you to hear it, if that's alright."

"Whatever you're comfortable with," Will replied, although he was dying to hear what Hannibal had to say. He was never vulnerable, and he wanted the chance to hear every emotion of his throughout the past few weeks.

Hannibal looked down at his lap. "It's not chronological. I just wrote things in the order I thought of them. But...I feel awe. Obsession. Betrayal. Intrigue. Feeling drawn to you. When you remembered, there was an intense feeling of relief. A wave of ecstacy. I feel safe with you. And, only very recently, I've realized I love you."

Every word made the pit in Will's stomach worse. "Fuck," he whispered to himself. "Hannibal, that's everything I wrote. Word for word, basically."

"That's what I thought would happen." Hannibal turned back around. "I was curious to know if our minds were working in the same way. It seems like they are."

"Shit. Fuck." Will slammed the pen down on the desk. "Hannibal, we're fucked. Our brains are becoming one, and one of us is going to become a blank slate. We won't be two separate people anymore."

"Will, slow down. You've panicked every time you have to tell me about this, so I want you to tell it to me calmly. Tell me about what this means for us. Don't spare me any details. What did Pazzi say to you?"

"He...he told me a story about a detective and a killer. Just like us. They used the LOOM to get information out of him." Will tried to steady his breathing. "Things were going well, and then they started taking a turn. The detective was going into the other guy's mind, and they suddenly started acting different. One day, the life sort of started seeping out of the detective. Acting really blank, zoning out, sleeping for long periods of time. And he couldn't really explain what was happening to him.

"The other guy, the killer, he started acting like two different people. He developed a new personality, it seemed. Like there was a good part of him and an evil part of him, and they were fighting against each other. Some days he'd wake up and claim to be himself, and other days he'd claim to be the detective."

"They merged into one person inside the killer's mind."

"I'm assuming that the detective's mind was strung apart by the frequent usage. He eventually disintegrated into nothing, while small parts of him entered the killer one by one. It ended up being some kind of amalgamated brain, with parts of each of them inside. He tried to kill himself."

"Do you think that was the work of the detective, or the killer? Which one had enough of the divide?"

"I'm not sure. When he told me the story, both men were getting psychiatric treatment. No one really spoke to them, since they refused to see anyone."

"And what do you think of that story, Will?"

"I...I'm not sure."

"I think you know. Tell me."

Will shook his head, frustrated. "I'm scared. It terrifies me."

"And why is that?"

"I don't want to die." Will's voice cracked. "I don't want to feel my own mind deteriorating little by little. Will I open my eyes one day and be inside of your body? Staring at my own husk, breathing but not there?"

"That may not be the case. Things seem different here." Hannibal tapped his foot in thought. "You haven't been disappearing. It's not like I've been taking over more than you. We're converging. You're not vanishing; we're both gaining small parts of the other. We can read each other's minds without realizing it."

"Then why would we swap?"

"Our brains likely don't understand what's happening. I've gained part of you, and you've gained part of me. Our confused bodies think that this is the new normal, and we need to adapt to a new habitat. But we were able to snap ourselves out of it. Perhaps it was a lucid state, not entirely real."

"I don't get this. It doesn't make any goddamn sense." Will leaned back in his chair, groaning. "What's happening to us, Hannibal?"

"What number am I thinking of? No scale. Any number at all."

"Come on, that's stupid—"

"Do it, Will."

"Say it at the same time. On three."

"One, two, three—"

"Eight hundred and sixty six," they said in unison. Will cursed, nearly leaping backwards out of his chair.

"God damn it!"

"Will—"

"I'm fucked. We're fucked. Hannibal, we've completely scrambled our brains."

"Let's try something else. Something more definitive." Hannibal reached towards him, holding Will's hands in his. "Calm down."

"I can't be calm during this."

"Maybe we should try to enter the palace. We should try and enter my mind without using the LOOM at all. If this is happening the way we think, then you should be able to enter without using it. And technically, I should be able to enter your mind, but yours is a lot different. You don't have a palace." Hannibal paused. "Do you?"

"I— I don't know. I mean, I think we all do, in a sense. We all have a place we escape to. I know I have that."

"What is that to you?"

"Well," he thought, "I'm outside. I'm standing in the river, wading up to my knees, fishing rod in my hand. Sun shining on me. I can hear the river rushing in my ears, and it smells like salt and fish."

"That's your peace."

"Yes."

"Enter it. And I want to try to meet you there. Without the LOOM, without anything. Just try."

Will closed his eyes. "I'm not too sure how I'm supposed to do it right here, right now. It doesn't come as naturally for me as it does for you."

"What if I sent you to sleep?" Hannibal asked. "Or I gave you a small dose of something? I have Valium, psilocybin, whiskey. No marijuana, but if that's what you need—"

"Nah. Can't stand the smell." Will rubbed his chin, thinking. "You know what? Give me the psilocybin."

"You're sure?"

"Yeah. It'll put me in the right mental state without having to use the machine. That way we're not putting ourselves in any more jeopardy."

"Do you think this is risky? Placing myself in your mental headspace? Could it merge us together even more?"

Will grunted. He hadn't thought of that. "Maybe. Maybe not. I think we need to try."

"Alright. If you insist." Hannibal stood. "I'll make some tea for you, with the drug inside. It doesn't taste the best, but I'll put the smallest amount in there anyway."

"Are you okay with this? I guess I should ask that first."

"Of course. Anything to help ease your consciousness — although this could make it worse. You will have to accept that risk."

"What do you think about this? About the possibility of us merging together? Does it scare you?"

"No."

"Not one bit?"

"The story you told, with a good man and a bad man coming together. There's dissonance there. Conflict. They don't want anything to do with each other, and so being confined to one mind is hell for them. They'll constantly be fighting for dominance." Hannibal put his hand on Will's shoulder. "But when I think of the two of us...we're alike. Our minds are very similar, as much as you may hate to admit it. We've bonded in ways that you cannot fathom right now, since your memories are out of place. The idea that both of us could combine into

one mind, one body, working in harmony and forever being intertwined..." He shrugged, something wistful in his eyes. "I think it sounds wonderful."

Will stared at him, silent. He didn't know what to say.

"I'll bring you your tea," Hannibal said, and he walked out of the room.

XXII- The Eye

"God, this is really bad." Will cleared his throat, resisting the urge to gag as he swallowed his first sip of tea. "I'm sorry. That's just...really bad." The drink was extremely bitter, and it tasted like sour dirt.

"I warned you." Hannibal put his hand on Will's upper arm before sitting down next to him. "Now, if you're not feeling right, let me know. I'll bring you some water, and we'll stop, okay?"

"I'll be fine." He choked down another sip. "Tell me about us. While we wait for it to kick in."

"What would you like to hear?"

"After you got me put in jail. How did I get out?"

"Murders kept happening even while you were behind bars." Hannibal smiled knowingly. "They realized you'd been framed. You didn't even have the chance to be sent back home, go to trial. It wasn't a long time."

"And why was that?" Will quirked an eyebrow. "You're not the type to slip up like that. You had all the power in your hands, and you kept killing? You didn't think that it would incriminate you?"

"It did incriminate me. But I considered it worth the risk." Hannibal shrugged. "Things weren't the same without you. We'd only known each other for a little while, two months at most, but we became so close after Mason's death. You were blossoming. You were beautiful." He stared ahead, lost in thought. "My suspicions were true. I had come across someone who could see my work as something gorgeous."

"Did I?"

"Well, that's for you to decide, right? I cannot entirely predict you. And you spent a lot of time trying to fool me, so what I consider to be your submission may have all been a ruse. Obviously, you cannot remember now, but how about in the present day?" He looked at Will inquisitively. "Have you?"

Will thought about what to say next. He didn't want to give the rest of himself over. He'd already been weak enough around Hannibal, and he knew that every tear, every shudder, ever vulnerable confession, was a point against him. Hannibal knew more about him than he knew about himself, and that was a terrifying concept to behold. At the same time, however, it was comforting; he felt like his memory, his life, was safe in Hannibal's calloused, blood-stained hands.

"What do you think?" He said. "What have you witnessed in me?"

"Well, before you regained your memory, I was seeing significant changes. Your conception of the things I do was rapidly shifting, like we'd discussed. Your treatment was going well."

Will frowned. "My treatment?"

"From the moment I laid eyes on you again, and I realized that you weren't the same, I made it my duty to bring you back. To restore your mind to the state it was in before we left each other. I wanted to see the Will I knew again." Hannibal leaned towards him. "I meticulously crafted the order of the visions I was to show you, and I planned to go for it at a much slower pace. But then you decided to take a step closer."

"I entered the memory without your permission."

"Yes. I was upset about it at first, but then I realized that this was a good thing. You were regaining your power. Becoming more connected to me."

"I started seeing things the way you saw them. Not the way you wanted other people to think you saw them." Will pursed his lips. "Did that make sense?"

"It did. I show the world that I'm normal. That I think the same ways they do. In reality, that's not the case, and you saw past that quicker than most people do," Hannibal said. "It was my mind. I had the power to keep whatever I wanted from you. But you knew the inner workings of my mind a lot better than anyone else. My palace was comfortable with you. It's used to you."

"Do you think of me a lot?"

"Not a day went by that I didn't think about you. There was no one that could replace you." Hannibal gave a sad smile. "So you made frequent appearances in my palace long before we reunited. Not just as a memory."

"You imagined me there?"

"I imagined us there. You and I together, enjoying the beauty of our lives." Hannibal gazed intensely at him. "I still have to remind myself sometimes that this isn't a fantasy anymore. This is real life. You are back with me, the way that fate intended. I knew you'd come back to me, Will."

Will wanted to reach for him. When he lifted his arm, his limbs felt extremely light, and he ended up nearly lifting his hand above his head. "Whoa." He shook out his arms, both of them jittery and weightless.

"Do you feel alright?"

"Yeah. I just...need to get a hold of myself." He could feel every movement of his heart, each muscle pulsating against his ribs. It was faster than usual.

"You probably won't be able to. That's sort of the point." Hannibal got up from his chair and knelt in front of him, holding Will's face in his hands. "Tell me what you see."

"Just spots." His vision was fading in and out, and with each blink the world around him seemed more distorted. One item in the background would start moving, Hannibal's hair would be a different color, the room would be a few degrees warmer. Hannibal's face danced in front of him, but his brown eyes stayed rather constant. "Some weird things."

"Relax. Don't let it get to you. This is a good thing, what we're trying to do." He stroked Will's cheek. "I need you to focus on something in front of you, and don't get distracted by anything else that may try to get your attention. Can you find that for me?"

Will focused on Hannibal's eyes. When he peered deeply into them, he noticed that he was spiraling downwards into them. The room was getting darker, morphing into the inside of a silo, and the eye was now a mural. A portrait of bodies, all laid out before him, various shades of mahogany and tan all curled together to create a beautiful eye. It was like looking into the eye of God.

"Good," a voice echoed from an unknown source. "Now drift. Get into the palace of your mind. Find that happy place. Remember what you told me about being down by the creek?"

"Right. Hannibal. You're here."

"I am here. Can you get to your palace, Will?"

"I don't want that." Will kept staring at the display. He was floating above it, slowly drifting down towards it. The bodies shifted with various cracks and wet noises, and the eye blinked before returning to normal. "I don't think I'm in my palace. But I want to be here."

"Where is here?"

"I...I think it's...I don't know exactly." Will relished every moment that he got closer. He wanted to lay in the middle, absorbing the beauty. "It's so beautiful, though."

"Tell me about it."

"Dozens...hundreds of bodies. They're all curled together. They're forming some kind of shape, like an eye."

"Are you in a dark room?"

"Yeah. I'm floating above them all. I can see an eye."

"Whose eye?"

"God is staring at me. He's watching me."

"How do you feel about that?"

"Powerful." Will smiled. "You'd have to see it for yourself."

"Perhaps I'll try."

There was a pause, and Will continued to drift downwards. He closed his eyes, excitement brewing in him. He didn't have to look at anything in the real world anymore; the vision was still here, still in front of him. He'd been transported. He looked down at his own body, which was completely bare of clothing, and he saw that his arms were drenched with thick blood.

The bodies contorted again, the eye blinking. Will could hear every minuscule shift of each organ and bone. As he watched, a new body formed in the middle, congregating together part by part. It took the shape of a man kneeling on the ground, his bare body more flushed than the ones around him. He was alive, and he was covered in blood that wasn't his own. He looked down at himself and his surroundings, more surprised to see himself naked than to see the carnage around him.

"Hannibal," Will called down to him. He was so close now.

Hannibal reached upwards. "Come down to me."

Will did. He reached the bottom of the structure, landing right in the pupil of the eye. There was a small circle of bare ground where they stood, carved just for them, and Will knelt in the same position in front of Hannibal. They stared at each other.

"The FBI found this," Will said. "They...people were going missing. And then we stumbled across this. I only ever saw pictures, until I was in your head."

"Yes. I saw it, too, although I came across it long before your lot came to clean it up." Hannibal put his hand on Will's chest. "I did some research once I heard about the missing people and followed what I believed to be the killer. I found him here, at work." He gestured to one of the bodies near them, indistinguishable from the others apart from a slightly more meticulous sewing job. "He needed someone to help him complete his masterpiece. I came at just the right time."

"What do you think of it?"

"I was overwhelmed with joy. I'd never seen something more beautiful in my life."

"That's how I felt. Not back then, but in your head, when I saw this from your point of view." A light rush of euphoria entered his chest. "It was so amazing. I think that's what really did it for me. It brought me back."

"What do you think it is about this eye that creates such emotion in you?"

"I feel...I feel seen." Even now, in the middle of the pupil, he could feel each body around them as if the eye was looking directly at them. When he gazed around the room, he realized that each corpse had its eyes wide open and was staring at them with clouded vision. Their eyes were pure white, and Will couldn't look into any of them for too long. "They're watching us. They see us."

"Do you like feeling seen?"

"Yes. They're grateful. They're afraid of us." Will's breath fluttered. "They're afraid of the power we hold."

"Will." Hannibal's hand traveled upwards, resting on the back of Will's neck. "We're not in your palace. We're in mine."

"Are we?"

"Yes. You perfectly described a scene in my own palace to me, so I went to check and found you here, in this room." Hannibal leaned up against him, pressing their bodies together. "You've just entered my palace without having to use the LOOM."

"Maybe it's not just yours anymore. Maybe it belongs to both of us."

"Let's leave this room. Let me show you where we are."

"I don't want to leave."

"We can come back. I promise."

Reluctantly, Will pushed himself to stand. He held onto Hannibal as he stood up, too, and Hannibal waved his hand. In a mere blink, they were back in the main foyer of the beautiful mansion, dressed in the finest suits and standing on the finest marble floors. He knew this room well now. This was unmistakably Hannibal's palace.

Will reeled from the sudden transition and the bright light that came with it. They stood together, holding hands, unsure what to make of all of this.

"Follow me," Hannibal said. "I'm curious about something."

He led Will towards the other side of the hallway, where a beautiful ornate door stood apart from the rest. Hannibal opened it, heavy wood creaking open, and Will felt a rush of fresh air. The sound of birds chirping drifted inside.

"Oh, Will," Hannibal said, shoulders falling. "Look."

Will came to stand in the doorway with him. They were looking outside, where a magnificent garden now bloomed in the backyard. Vines wound around great, tall trees, and vibrant flowers grew in the green grass. At the center of it all, there was a massive river with clear water that rushed gently downstream. It looked like the river Will was used to dreaming about. The one in his palace.

The sight took the breath out of him. He fell down onto his knees, and Hannibal rushed to support him.

"It's here," Hannibal said, awe in his voice. "This is your palace. It's found a home in mine."

"This is the exact place." Will trembled. "You were wrong. I did enter my palace. But it's not just mine anymore. And it's not just yours, either."

"No. This is ours. This is all ours."

"Oh, my god." Will felt a tear stream down his cheek. "There's no going back anymore, is there?"

"I don't think so."

"Fuck." Will curled up into himself. "Am I just hallucinating?"

"You are definitely hallucinating. But that's what going into the palace is. I'm technically hallucinating, too." Hannibal rubbed his back.

"I'm so fucking confused. I don't understand what's happening to us."

"Will, calm down. If you panic, you might start to spiral. I don't want you to have a bad trip." He helped Will stand. "Come here. Let's go for a walk. Do you want to wade in the creek?"

"I don't know."

They walked together, with Hannibal supporting Will by his upper arm. They trudged towards the river slowly, and when Will stepped into the water he was shocked by how cold it was. It helped him sober up a bit. They walked until they were knees-deep, not caring about the state of their clothes.

"Listen to the water. Breathe." Hannibal held him close, gently swaying with the water. "Put your head back, close your eyes, and breathe."

Will inhaled. The smell of sweet flowers entered his nose. He exhaled. He relaxed against Hannibal's body.

"Here's what I'm picking up," Hannibal said softly. "We did this because we wanted to see if you could enter your own mind palace. And I wanted to try to meet you there. Instead, though, you ended up traveling into my mind. Not yours. It seems like parts of your mind have melded into mine, likely irreparably."

"We're never going to be apart again," Will croaked out.

"No. Even if we were across the world from each other, if we travel into our own heads, we'll see each other."

"I'm so sorry." Will was failing the fight against the urge to cry. "I've ruined you."

"Oh, no. No, Will." Hannibal held his face, leaning his forehead against Will's. Their faces were centimeters apart. "This is so wonderful. It's all I've ever wanted, ever since I met you."

"Why?"

"Because I love you."

"I've infiltrated the only place you have entirely to yourself."

"I've been by myself for my entire existence. I don't want to be alone anymore." Hannibal's breath hitched. "I love you, Will. I know that you only just remembered me, but I need you. Please stay with me."

"I want to stay. If I stay long enough, I'll remember everything." Will held onto him for dear life. "I'm coming back to myself, little by little. And you help me feel seen."

"I do see you. Now let me cherish you."

Hannibal kissed him on the lips, and Will melted into it. He couldn't imagine himself being anywhere else. This was so much better than his own mind, than being by himself. He felt the warm eyes of God shining down on them. They were two minds combined into one, and the power that came with that was going to be so wonderful.

"It's beautiful," Will breathed between kisses. "This is so beautiful. The eye. The way you see the world. The blood on my hands."

"Oh, I love you." Hannibal smiled. "I love you."

"Let's finish the process," Will said. "Let's do whatever we have to do to bring us together for good. I can't live without this anymore."

"We have to burn down the rest of the world around us. Are you willing to do that?"

Will thought of Walter, of Jack, of all of his dogs. Most of all, he thought of poor Molly. She was going to be devastated. And that was if she was left alive.

But Will couldn't do this anymore. He needed to be in this wonderful place for the rest of his life.

"I'll do anything."

He heard something begin to fizz underneath him. Both of them looked down to see the water start to bubble, and they slowly began to sink. Will's legs tingled the further they sank into the water, and he started to feel disconnected from the lower half of his body.

"It's time to wake up," Hannibal said, "but we'll be back. I promise."

Before Will could answer, his eyes opened. He was slumped in his chair, tea still sitting beside him, and the sun had long set outside the windows. It had been hours. He was drenched in sweat.

Hannibal was sitting across from him, and his eyes opened as well. They looked at each other with wide eyes for a long time, sitting in silence, and then eventually they came together in a quiet embrace.

"Let's figure this out," Hannibal said.

XXIII- The Visit

April 24, 2030

"We'll give our brains a break," Hannibal said, handing Will a warm mug of coffee the next morning, "and tonight, we'll continue. Nothing but talking today."

Will nodded, breathing in the scent of the fresh grounds. Here, in Hannibal's kitchen, dressed in Hannibal's sweater and drinking from Hannibal's mug, he felt more at home than ever. It made his heart sing, but it scared the remaining rational parts of his brain.

"Speaking of tonight," Hannibal continued, a twinge of apprehension in his eyes, "I was wondering if you'd allow me to make you...something special for dinner."

Will's stomach dropped. "I...as in?" He knew the answer, but he wanted to hear Hannibal say it.

"A special protein. Something more substantial than chicken or fish."

"Long pig."

Hannibal smirked. "Something along those lines, yes."

Will took a sip of coffee to mask the look on his face. "You've got too many eyes in you right now, Hannibal."

"I know. I always have some on hand, of course. The hog is a very large animal. You cannot consume it all at once, especially since there's only one of me. Most of it ends up in the freezer for later." He studied Will. "You are allowed to refuse."

"I know." Will let the thoughts roil through his head, bouncing frantically off the sides. He wanted to take that next step, to venture into a deeper part of the labyrinth, but his last remaining strings of morality were pulling him back. They tugged him in the direction of his normal life, and he wanted to listen — but he also wanted to cut the strings with a knife and forge his own trail. He was sick of going back and forth. He was sick of good and evil. But there would always be conflict within him.

"What keeps you reserved?" Hannibal asked. "You were not involved in the slaughter."

"It feels like the final step."

"Oh, no. The final step *is* the slaughter." Hannibal put his hand on Will's shoulder. "Feeling the blood flowing between your fingers again. That will be the final step that awakens you. You're awake now, but in that moment? You will *rise*." His eyes gleamed. "I cannot wait to see it."

"Does it hurt? To have to witness me start over from scratch after working so hard before?"

"No, because you're not starting over. You never finished." He rubbed Will's arm. "You came close. You tasted victory, but you let yourself hesitate. That's when everything flipped upside down. I wouldn't say that you had to start from scratch. Your brain is accustomed to me. We merely put things on pause."

"And now we're fast-forwarding to the end."

"I think this is the proper pace. You conquered the hard part long ago. Now it's a matter of coming to terms with it all. Embracing it. That's the fun part."

"How do I embrace it?"

"You must become the butcher, Will," Hannibal urged, "and to do that, you must first understand the product you're trying to achieve."

"I have to get another taste."

"Your first in five years. I'm curious to witness what it will do to your mind."

"Probably something similar to earlier." Will shrugged.

"Right. That was another major step." Hannibal's gaze was one of awe and excitement. "You're doing very well. I'm proud of you."

"I'm sure you're proud of yourself, as well."

"Oh, I did nothing. This was inside of you long before you met me. You are not a product of my influence, you are a more enlightened version of yourself. All you needed was a little motivation."

"I'm probably a more evil version of myself."

"Evil is such a subjective term. Don't reduce yourself to that." He shook his head. "Besides, perhaps you were doing the right thing before. But you were suffering. And look at you now." He gestured between the two of them, giving Will a quick kiss on the top of his head.

"You can make it tonight," Will said, smiling. "I'm curious to see what it does to me, too."

Hannibal beamed.

——

"You have to— no, dear, you're going too fast."

"Aw, hell, I'm not built for this. I've got fat fingers." Will took Hannibal's hand. "Much different from these manicured ones."

Hannibal smiled. "You're expecting too much of yourself too quickly. Harpsichord is difficult."

"You make it look easy."

"I've been playing since I was a boy. I believe your first lesson started about ten minutes ago."

Their smiles fell upon hearing a knock at the front door. The two of them exchanged a glance, and slowly Hannibal stood.

"I think it's best if you hide," he said quietly, "unless you want to be found. In which case, now's your chance."

"Were you expecting anyone?"

Hannibal shook his head wordlessly. Will reached for his hand and gave it a light squeeze before he walked off, going back into the bedroom and shutting the door. The last thing he wanted was to be found. The last thing he wanted was to have to leave. Not after everything they'd been through.

Then again, they never had to leave each other anymore. Will sat on the bed with his back straight, a wild idea festering in his head. He had to know if this would work — he had to be aware of what was going on. He needed to be on the same page as Hannibal.

He lay back on the mattress and closed his eyes. He breathed deeply, imagining the rush of a creek, and before he knew it his senses were overwhelmed with the beauty of nature. The smell of flowers, cold water up to his knees, warm sun and a soothing breeze. When he opened his eyes, he was there; the creek surrounded him, and magnificent butterflies fluttered about the bright garden. It was his palace, but it was more beautiful than it had ever been. Ahead of him was a towering mansion with a back door standing wide open for him. He trudged out of the creek and ran for it.

When he stepped into the doorway, the interior was familiar and warm. He was in the foyer of Hannibal's house — the real one — and once he'd taken a few breaths he realized that this wasn't his body. This wasn't his view. His posture was straighter, and his proportions felt slightly off. He was in Hannibal's body, and he had now become a spectator to Hannibal's behavior.

He could also see that Jack Crawford was standing before him.

Will's appearance inside his head made Hannibal's breath hitch, and Will did his best not to panic. Hannibal was still under watch; things hadn't settled forever, but Will had been telling himself that things were fine. It must have caught up to them now, the way Will had snuck around and stolen from the FBI and dodged all of his responsibilities. Jack must have found something out.

"Nice place you've got here, Doctor," Jack said, pacing around the foyer and inspecting everything around him. "Very nice."

"I appreciate it, sir. Is there anything I can do for you?"

Jack sighed. "I'll be blunt. You know that the waters are still muddy around the Ripper case, yes? That new evidence is being uncovered every day."

"I'm aware."

"Are you aware of any updates from Will Graham?"

Hannibal tilted his head. "I don't believe so. Last I saw him was in your office."

"You sure about that?" Jack raised an eyebrow. "Because I've heard differently."

"Perhaps someone told me something. But it's been a stressful few weeks, I'm sure you understand—"

"Will hasn't been the same since he met you," Jack said. "His family has told me that he's completely fixated on you. He's been interviewing people who know you, his wife said. He's been sneaking off at night, having panic attacks, shifting to other realities...has he come to see you at any point, Doctor? You won't be in trouble. We'd just like to know."

"I haven't heard a word from Will Graham, nor have I seen a glimpse of him." Hannibal's voice was stern, and even Will felt inclined to believe him. He truly was convincing. "I hate to hear that he's not doing well, really. If he's looking for any help, anyone to confide in, I'll be available—"

"I don't think that would be a good idea." Jack laughed to himself, understanding a joke that neither of the other two men could. "You know that Chilton is still refusing to confess, correct?"

"I didn't know that. I haven't been following much, I'm afraid."

"You should be," Jack said. "Just so you can be up to date. Basically, though— everything that he's said so far is about you. Everything is *Hannibal, Hannibal, Hannibal*. Does that sound right to you?"

"He's convinced I framed him. But I believe he tried to frame me. The evidence does not lie."

"True. But people do." Jack stared at him for a moment. "I know the surveillance on the house has stopped, but please keep your ears open. We may need you in the near future."

"Of course. And if I hear anything from Will, I'll call you."

"Great." Jack produced a business card from his pocket and handed it to Hannibal, who took it like it was something dirty. "Now, you call me if you think of something that you may have forgotten." He looked Hannibal up and down for a while, and Will could sense the way Hannibal's hackles stood up. "I'm glad to see you've found your voice again. Have a nice day, Doctor."

Hannibal nodded his head to hide the clear narrowing of his eyes. "Thank you."

Hannibal saw Jack out the front door. Once he was gone, he stood in front of it for a long while.

"...You're in my head," Hannibal said aloud. "You made it in there without even having to try."

"I don't really know how to get back." When Will spoke, it was with Hannibal's mouth. Hannibal's voice. To any outsider, Hannibal would just be a crazy man talking to himself.

"Do what we've done before. Imagine yourself waking, and you will."

Will pulled himself away from Hannibal's vision, just like he'd done in the palace before. He was in the vast mansion again, and from there he imagined himself regaining his senses. Returning to the real world. His limbs became heavier, and he pictured the bed underneath him.

He opened his eyes, and there he was. Staring at the ceiling of Hannibal's bedroom.

A moment later, he heard the door open. Hannibal came to sit at his side, placing his hand on Will's thigh. Will didn't want to sit up; he wasn't sure he had the strength.

"I believe you and I have a choice to make," Hannibal said after a long pause. "We cannot continue in this exact way forever."

"I can't live without you," Will said automatically. It was the only thing he knew for sure. "Not again."

"That was never an option I considered." He squeezed Will's thigh. "Being apart from you would be a visceral pain now. A removal of part of my psyche."

"We need to run." Will paused. "I need to figure a few things out, and then we can go."

"Such as?"

"I can't just..." Will looked down at his left hand, his wedding ring. "She's my wife, Hannibal. I have to give her some kind of closure. And I have to make sure she's left with plenty of finances, security, all that."

"How much does she know?"

"Not much."

"Will." His voice was colder than Will was used to. It made his heart skip a beat. "That's a lie. We've been in and out of each other's brains all week; do not take me for a fool."

Will couldn't hold back the truth, but he also didn't want Hannibal to hunt Molly down. She probably knew too much, sure, but that didn't mean she had to die. People were going to deduce what happened anyway, especially if they both disappeared. Molly made no difference in the end.

Will told him as such, and Hannibal shook his head. "She knows much more about you than anyone else in the public. She could give vital information away."

"There are plenty of people in my life that could do that."

"I'm not saying that anything has to happen to her." Hannibal tapped his foot. "I understand that would hurt you beyond comprehension, and I don't want you to be hurt. Not anymore. But something must be done to silence her."

"I'm sure no money in the world could cure how angry she's going to be. I mean, she won't want me back, but she'll want to spite me. Reveal where I am."

"What about fear?"

Will's brows drew together. "I don't want to traumatize her."

"We wouldn't. We would simply give her an ultimatum. Keep quiet, and we will keep her alive."

"Hannibal." A calm and quiet rage started to burn in Will's cheat. "Don't talk about my wife like she's something expendable. You and I are special, yes. I've known you longer. But I married her for a reason." Will finally sat up, firmly looking Hannibal in the eyes. "I care about her. So don't talk about her like that."

Hannibal didn't answer for a moment. They stared into each other's eyes, and Hannibal finally leaned in to kiss Will on the lips. It was gentle, apologetic, and it didn't last long. Will relaxed.

"Right," Hannibal said. "I understand."

"I'm not going back to her. I care about her, but I can't do that. I need you," Will reassured him. "I'm not going anywhere."

"I know." Hannibal gave him another quick peck. "We'll solve this together."

"Yes, we will."

"Are you worried about tonight? Taking your first bite?"

"I'm not worried, no. I want to know what it feels like. I've been in your brain, but I haven't felt the true sensations."

"It's so wonderful." Hannibal brushed Will's curls off of his forehead. "It brings you so much power. It will change you."

"It'll change me *back*. I think it's the thing that will finally bring my old self back."

"Don't be upset if it doesn't. We have time."

"Not a lot of it. Jack knows something is wrong."

"We have more power than any of them. We're in each other's minds." Hannibal held onto his hand. "Even if something were to happen, if we were to be captured, all we'd have to do is close our eyes. We could escape into that world again, and we could be together."

"I don't want it to come to that. I want to be together in this world."

"I have faith in us. I have faith that we will." Hannibal got up from the bed. "I suppose I should start preparing dinner. Would you like to help?"

———

"You slice the ginger," Hannibal instructed him, holding a sharp knife out toward Will. The blade was pointing at his own wrist, not outwards, so Will could safely grab onto the handle. It didn't slip past Will that Hannibal trusted him enough to do this; he put Will's safety over his own in every situation. Every fleeting glance was one of worship.

Will took the knife and followed orders.

"I'm curious, Will," Hannibal said as he got to work with his own part of the cooking. "What are you expecting to happen tonight? When your lips close around that first bite and the flavors hit your tongue? What's the thing you'd like the most?"

"The thing I'm expecting and the thing I want most are different." Will shrugged. "I'm expecting it to affect me, but I don't think it'll be the magic pill. What I want...that's something else entirely."

"What do you want?"

"It's irrational. But there is a part of me that wishes it would change everything." He kept a close eye on the knife as he sliced, both out of safety and embarrassment. "One bite would alter my brain chemistry. It would get rid of Jack, it would change the way I think about Molly. My compassion for her is...inconvenient, in this situation." He sighed. "I would shed this skin and step into a new one. And, if I really had my way, I'd simply step into yours."

"You want to become me?"

"I want to *envelop* you. I want you to envelop me. We would eventually cease to be something separate."

"I thought you were afraid of that. You showed fear before, of losing your agency. You didn't want to use the LOOM anymore because of it."

"I was. But then I saw that eye, and flowers started blooming in the garden of your palace. We've already started to come together, and from the small glimpses I've seen, it's paradise."

Hannibal paused, and when he finally spoke again his voice was quieter and filled with more emotion than Will was used to. "That...that brings me a lot of joy, Will. That thought. The fact that you and I agree on our desires."

"I don't think that this meal will do it. But I think we'll eventually be able to reach it."

"What about your body? Our bodies, I suppose. Will one be discarded of?"

"Oh, it wouldn't be every moment. Our bodies would still be ours. But there would come specific moments where the brains would be combined. Every move, every thought, every decision, would be mutually agreed upon."

"What sort of moments are these?"

"Moments similar to the ones you've shown me in your palace. The beautiful tableaux, bright and overwhelming movement and power." Will shuddered with pleasure in his heart. "During idle moments, in which normal people would retreat into their own heads, we would still be together. I wouldn't breathe a single breath without you within my reach. Neither would you."

"Sounds absolutely beautiful, Will. Intoxicating." Hannibal was glowing. "I would trade it all to have that with you. I think that this meal could provide something very close."

"You have a lot of faith in your cooking."

"I have a lot of faith in you." Hannibal set his knife down. "I have faith that you'll take this meal with grace. You won't just eat it, you will experience it. That is what will bring you to absolution."

"Noted." Will finished his final slice. "Any sort of change is desirable at this point."

"You're beautiful. I'm not seeking to completely erase the being that you are now. I'm looking to free the true self that you have hidden underneath."

"I need to be free." Will looked at him, witnessing a halo of light from the stovetop forming around him. He was a god. He was everything.

"I will free you," he promised.

XXIV- The Meal

April 24, 2030

"I've prepared you pork *lomo saltado*. Marinated and presented with tomatoes, onions, and carrot slaw." Hannibal set the plate down in front of Will, placing his now free hand on Will's shoulder. He leaned in and kissed Will's cheek, lips hovering by his ear. "It comes from the finest pig. *Bon appetit*."

"Thank you." Will stared at the beautifully plated meal before him. "It smells delicious."

"I hope that it's a good experience for you. Everything you want and more."

"Even if it's not, it's still a meal with you. It's making up for lost time."

"We will never lose time again." Hannibal pulled away, but his hand lingered on Will's body for as long as possible. He set down his own plate, sitting right across from Will. "I will do anything in my power to make sure of it."

"I believe you." Will looked up at him, and they shared a dark glance. "And from now on, I will, too."

Hannibal smiled. "You are so lovely. I still find it hard to believe that I've woken up the past few mornings with you right across from me. Your stunning face near mine again, and this time it's more real than ever."

"No more retreating into your palace to find me. I'm here now."

"I will admit, it's been difficult for me to accept." He picked up his utensils, and Will followed suit. "I have felt this close to the sun before, and then it was all ripped away from

me. You betrayed me, I lashed out, and I lost you for half a decade."

"I know. I'm not sure what I can do to make you believe me this time. I know I have to regain your trust, but..."

"Oh, Will. You will always have my trust." Hannibal shook his head solemnly. "Even if it goes against my best interest, you will always have my trust."

"Why?"

"Because I truly believe you are capable of greatness. Even after your betrayal, as you lay bleeding on the ground, you called out to me. Asked me to come back." His eyes began to shine. "It is my greatest regret that I did not."

"Do you think we would have been the same if you had, though? Would we be this connected, this intimate with each other? We wouldn't have had the benefit of using the LOOM. We wouldn't have had the clarity that comes with absence."

"That is true. And I'm grateful for the opportunities we did have. But I do wish the absence hadn't been so long." Hannibal began to cut into the meat. "I feel you should know. This is the exact meal I made you on the night we had sex for the first time. When you brought me the body of your first victim."

"I thought Mason was the first."

"Yes. But this was your first intentional kill. Your first meal. I figured it would be beneficial for you to have it again. Retrieve those memories through the senses, like you have before."

"Good idea." Will pierced a piece with his fork, holding it above the plate. He glanced up at Hannibal with an expectant eyebrow quirk. "Shall we?"

"Enjoy, my dear."

They both breathed in the scent of the meal, closed their eyes, and took a bite.

Will chewed it slowly, running the idea through his head over and over again that this was human meat. This was no sirloin; it was the product of one of Hannibal's victims, slowly extinguished of their life under Hannibal's torturous hands. Judging by the crimes of the Chesapeake Ripper, this animal was horrified when it died. It was slaughtered with no mercy, its organs ripped from it while it was still breathing. This had been someone walking along the street, someone that had once been just like the two of them. Human, living, speaking, with a pumping heart and a brain capable of complex thought. Hannibal had single-handedly decided whether or not a human deserved to live or die.

Under Hannibal's hands, though, everyone deserved to die. He was omniscient. He would always be the one with the most power, with the final say. Will had surrendered himself to Hannibal's palace, after all, not the other way around. This was his dominion. Will was just lucky that they were intellectual equals. If it weren't for his innate darkness, that invisible tether inside of him that would always call him back to power and violence, then Will could have been another victim.

But he was capable of greatness. That's what Hannibal had said. And Will would never doubt anything Hannibal said ever again.

Will chewed it slowly.

When he finally opened his eyes once more, the room around him was completely different. He hadn't sensed any changes, so the sudden shift made him jump in his chair. The lights were different, this table was different, this dining room was completely separate from the one he'd just been sitting in. But this position, sitting right across from Hannibal, and this meal were exactly the same.

"You can't say that I am evil," Hannibal said to him. This version of him was more sheltered than he was now; there was a hint of apprehension in his eyes, like he expected Will to lash out at him like a rabid dog at any moment. Their trust hadn't fully been snapped into place yet.

"You're destructive." As always in these memories, Will spoke without thinking about it. He was separated from his own body. He could still taste every intricacy of the meat. "Same thing."

"Evil is just destructive?" Hannibal's eyes narrowed. "Storms are evil, if it's that simple. And we have fire. And then there's hail. Underwriters lump it all under acts of God." He leaned forward. "Is this meal an act of God, Will?"

Will clenched his hand into a fist, feeling the burn of raw knuckle wounds rubbing against gauze. He took another bite, letting the question marinate in the air as the tender, moist meat took over his mouth. It tasted so, so good.

He took his time swallowing. "Yes." He kept staring down at his hand. "Yes, it was."

He blinked, and the bandages were gone. That same hand was instead wrapped around the handle of a gun. His arm raised, and he saw Hannibal facing off the barrel — they were in this kitchen, during the day this time, and Will had never felt more hatred for anyone else in his life. He was going to shoot. Every part of him wanted to shoot. I hate you, I hate you, I hate you for locking me away and framing me. You've ruined my life. I know who you are, and I'm going to make sure everyone else knows, too.

He blinked. The gun was now at his side, and Hannibal's palm was on his face. They stood somewhere new, some sort of barn that stank of manure. He was going to shoot. Every part of him wanted to shoot. He glared at his intended target, a bloodied man kneeling on the hay, but when Hannibal began to speak, Will's attention shifted. He felt his heart pick up its pace when he looked into Hannibal's eyes. I don't know how I feel about you. All I know is that you're changing me. I know who you are. I know who I'm becoming.

He blinked. His hand was gripping his cell phone. He was alone. The only source of Hannibal's voice was through the tinny speaker of the phone; only one word escaped his mouth, but it was enough. I need you. I'll sacrifice the greater good to keep you safe. I know who I've become.

The eye of God was staring directly into his soul. It was a color palette of human bodies. It called to him with its carnage, and his own eyes burned with moved tears. He wanted to lie in the middle, to be enveloped by beauty. So many useless lives recycled to craft something magnificent.

Something small and fleshy travelled down his throat, shocking him out of this flash of images. He jolted back to the present with a soft gasp, nearly choking on the bite in his esophagus, and cleared his throat. Hannibal was staring at him.

"You were out for a while there," he said softly. "What do you think?"

Will noticed that his cheeks were wet with tears. He quickly speared another bite onto the end of his fork and shoved it in his mouth.

"Think of how it felt." Hannibal spoke right in his ear, startling Will. When he opened his eyes, he was somewhere else again: an office, Hannibal's office. He was sitting in a chair, with Hannibal hovering right over his shoulder and holding Will's wrists. They both stared at Will's hands.

"Remember blood on your skin," Hannibal said, his voice soft and soothing. "Do you remember?"

"I remember." Will's heart was pounding with adrenaline.

"The weight of a body hanging on yours, falling weakly under your power. Do you remember?"

"Yes." And it was true. He was remembering. Everything was going to come back to him, just as he'd hoped. "I'll never forget it."

"You will never feel that much euphoria ever again." Hannibal let go of Will's wrists, instead caressing Will's shoulders. Will kept his hands upright, staring at them, feeling the blood

imprinted on them once more. "Not unless you do it again."

Blink. The pendulum swung. Real blood covered his hands, fingers wrapped around the raw intestine of a man he'd worked with for months. He'd gutted Rinaldo Pazzi like a fish. He was pacing about the room, a smile growing on his face as the euphoric power set in. This was his third kill. Every single one got better. Hannibal would be proud of him.

It wasn't all about making Hannibal proud. It was also about satisfaction. Power. Domination. It was the final twist of a key to unlock the deepest parts of himself, something he'd been hiding away for so many years. His entire life.

Blink. The pendulum swung. His hands were covered in the blood of a young boy who had abused a dog. It was the first crack in the facade. He was a child again, full of emotions and not yet socialized enough to hide them.

Blink. The pendulum swung. He was straddling Hannibal, wrapping his hands around the man's throat and fighting the urge to squeeze. That's all it would take, and Hannibal would let him. But they had other things to think about — the most important being ecstasy. Pleasure. There was no blood on his hands, but he could feel Hannibal's pulse throbbing under his palms.

"How does it feel?" Will hissed. "To be under my thumb for once?"

"Oh, you've had me there this whole time." Hannibal bucked his hips, moaning softly. "Since the moment we met."

Blink. The pendulum swung. He was slumped over on the kitchen floor, his own blood spilling between his fingers as he desperately tried to cover the fresh slice in his torso. Hannibal stood over him, eyes glimmering with tears, fingers wrapped so tightly around the hilt of the blade. His hands were trembling.

"Do you believe you could change me the way I've changed you?"

"I already did." Will grit his teeth. The pain was just as real as it had been in the moment. "You said it yourself."

"That was a moment of weakness." Hannibal stepped forward, holding out the knife in a gesture of warning. "And you've taught me a lesson. Never — never, Will — will I be weak again."

Pazzi, Will wanted to shout, *Pazzi is dead. I killed him for you*. But no — to admit so would be foolish. There wasn't a point. Hannibal had made up his mind; he couldn't reverse the trajectory of things. The teacup was shattered.

Still. "Please don't go," Will whispered, closing his eyes. "Please?"

The air was sucked out of the room, along with the pain and the blood on his hands. It all dissipated, changing the scenery beneath him. Things felt more stable now. He swallowed the bite of meat, letting it slowly sink down his throat, and as he did so he felt a gentle hand on his arm.

"I won't," Hannibal told him, resting his forehead on Will's shoulder. "I promise."

Will held him there, relishing the feeling of being loved so deeply. He rubbed Hannibal's back and let the emotions take over. His chest was simultaneously caving in and filling with endless adoration. He'd never felt something so genuine in his life. Molly may as well have been a stranger in that moment. Their breaths synced; finally they were back together again. After years of being torn apart, two sides of the same soul were merging into one.

Will folded over Hannibal and embraced him. They nuzzled close to each other, with Will resting his cheek on Hannibal's shoulder blades. He felt something pulling at his brain, tugging it towards a powerful magnet. He let it happen.

"I love you," they said in unison, completely synced down to every last syllable. They sat that way for a long time, feeling each other rise and fall. Dinner was long forgotten.

"What did you see?" Hannibal asked. "Did you remember anything?"

"I saw everything." New vitality flowed through his veins. His blood was liquid gold, his chest was as light as the clouds. "You changed me."

"Oh, no. You were always this way. I merely saw the beauty inside of you, trying to fight its way out, and I helped you discover it."

"We're never going to separate again."

"Never. Not if I have anything to say about it, at least."

"Even if we tried, we couldn't." Will turned his head to inhale Hannibal's scent. "But we have to do something. We have to go."

"I know." Hannibal finally extracted himself from Will's grip. He held Will's face in his hands and gave him a kiss on the lips. He tasted of wine and, although faint, tears. "I can't believe you're here with me. Fate has entwined our souls once more."

"It was worth the wait. It was all worth it." Will kissed him back. "I love you. I always have. I just had to find it again."

"I'm so glad I'm not the only one. My beloved. Beautiful Will." Hannibal smiled through his tears. Will remembered what he'd said all those years before: never will I be weak again. What a change from the current situation.

"I love you," Will said again. "And I think I have a plan."

XXV- The Destruction

April 26, 2030

Will and Hannibal spent the entire next day giving themselves a genuine break. They didn't allow themselves to think about the LOOM, Molly, or Jack for a second. They merely enjoyed each other's company, eating light meals and reading books and spending time in each other's arms. At first, there was a slight hesitancy between them, as neither of them know how to approach domesticity, but eventually Hannibal slipped his arm around Will and it felt just right. Will's body completely sank into it, and he leaned up against Hannibal to snuggle into him. They fit together like two puzzle pieces.

"Does this feel different?" Hannibal asked him. "Are things like this with your wife?"

It was always *your wife.* It was like Hannibal didn't want to assign a name to the person who'd stolen his love. "Yeah, we do this kind of stuff. But I don't think either of us felt this way. This...click." He shrugged. "Her first husband died. I think she still struggles with it sometimes."

"You both lost someone important to you. Someone you struggled to move on from. It affected the way you loved each other."

"Right. Even though I didn't know it at the time."

"You and I have an intrinsic bond. I don't think anyone could ever replace it." He stroked Will's hair. "And I'm not saying that because I'm biased."

Will smiled softly, but it didn't last long. "It's still going to wreck her. Losing her second husband."

"You know her better than I do. But wouldn't it be better to lose her now? To walk away before the situation gets too intense?" Hannibal asked. "You've already shown signs that you're changing. You two have begun to fight. Perhaps it would be better to walk away before things get worse. Before you hurt her in a more meaningful way."

"I guess, yeah." Will nodded. "That's along the lines of my plan, though."

"Ah, yes, your fabled plan."

"Hush. We're not talking about it today, remember?" Will lay his head on Hannibal's chest. "Tell me more about us."

That day, although lovely, was over. They didn't have much longer before Will was expected back at work, back at home, and they had to decide their next moves. It was evening now. The sun had set on their happiness.

"You may not care for this," Will said, sipping his wine that Hannibal had poured for them, "but I'm going to have to go back home."

"Correct. I don't care for it."

"I have to cover my bases, Hannibal. I have to make sure all evidence of our relationship is erased."

"And is there an issue with our relationship being public?"

"Of course there is," Will snapped, but when he looked over he saw that Hannibal was smirking at him. He was teasing him. "God, you know that."

"I do. I simply don't like having you away from me." Hannibal savored the wine in his mouth. "And I worry what it will do to you."

"Meaning?"

"What if you return home and you forget who you are again? What if you change your mind?"

"I won't forget. I can't close my eyes without finding you anymore." Will set down his glass, reaching over the armrest of his chair. He held out his hand, palm up, an olive branch silhouetted by the firelight. "There's no going back now. And I wouldn't want to."

Hannibal took his hand. His grip was warm and comforting. "What will you do at home?"

"Have a conversation with Molly. Pack my things. Make sure all my notes are hidden. I'm going to run away from my family." He blinked, surprised with how the idea sounded. It was so ruthless. "Leave them behind."

"Will the dissonance get to you?" Hannibal glanced at him. "Will you step back on your duties because of your empathy?"

"It's better for them this way."

"You'll tell her that the relationship is over? Give it a few days beforehand?"

"Yeah. Break down even further. Make it so she won't miss me, and make it more plausible that I'd want to run away. Then, she'll see me off." Will felt the reality of the situation sink in. "I'll say goodbye to the life I've had these past few years."

"Will you miss it?"

"Not when I know you're waiting for me on the other side." Will smiled softly. "Once I've hit the road, I'll go to my cabin. And you'll meet me there." He reached into his pocket with his other hand, pulling out a slip of paper. He offered it to Hannibal, who let go of Will's hand for a moment to take it. "That's the address. You'll meet me there when I tell you to. We'll leave a note, leave my car there, and then Will Graham is going to die."

Hannibal raised his eyebrows, and Will held up his hand. "Not actually. But it has to look like I'm dead."

"Why would we do that? Is it not enough to have you run away?"

"If a clearly mentally unstable man runs away from his wife and kid that he's been with for three years, completely unprovoked, and then the man he has extreme connections to also disappears? They're gonna come looking. We have to make it so they don't."

"So I am going to disappear, too?"

"Not for a little while. You'll sit through the investigation, listen to what Jack tells you. Maintain your innocence the entire time. We'll get you an alibi for that night. I'm sure you know how to do that."

"You know me well."

"Once the dust has settled, and I'm fully pronounced dead, maybe not even until after my funeral, we'll leave. You and I can find a new place to meet, and I'll take up a new name. That, or I'll just step away from civilization. No birth certificate, no ID." He shrugged. "I think I'm more Hannibal Lecter than I am Will Graham anymore."

"Don't say that. You are still your own person, Will."

"I know that. But it's tiring." He leaned his head back against the chair. "Being my own person. It gets really exhausting sometimes. I've never really minded stepping into your head. Gives me a chance to breathe."

"Do you think this desire for space, this desire to breathe easily, is impacting your decision-making? Can I be sure you're of sound mind to make such a large change in your life?"

"You'll just have to trust that I know what I want."

"What if they find us? If something happens to either of us, like an arrest, or God forbid a murder."

"If something happens to one of us, I think the other will know. I think we're in tune enough to know. And we can communicate easily now. We can see where the other is, what they're experiencing, what they're thinking. Kind of super-powered, the two of us."

"If one dies — what do you assume will happen?"

"That, I don't know. We can't really be sure. Either the other one dies, too — which, I'm not really sure how that would happen — the one that's left has an empty spot in their head where the other used to be, or the dead one lives on in the other person's head. Not as a construct of the living's imagination, but as a true...soul, I guess. It feels stupid to call it a soul."

"It's your mind. All of the intangible aspects of yourself. If you were to die, say, would you then transfer into my brain permanently? Is that what you're saying?"

"Yeah. But not because you're imagining me. I would actually be there. Like I was with the LOOM."

"A permanent form of the LOOM. I see. But how would that even work?"

"Maybe...and, of course, we're just theorizing. It shouldn't have to come to this."

"Of course." Hannibal nodded.

"Maybe, before I died, I could travel into your head. Then, when my body died, the rest of me wouldn't. My mind would no longer have a body to travel back to. So then I'd be in yours forever."

"That's, of course, if you have the time to enter my mind beforehand. If your death is not instantaneous."

"Right. But I think it's getting easier and faster for us to travel." Will shook his head. "God, this is weird. Are you just absolutely fucking weirded out right now? Or is it just me?"

"I am absolutely fucking weirded out."

Both of them laughed, and it felt good. Will could feel the way their brains connected, the way that serotonin shot across their neurons at the exact same rate. Their laughs were synced.

"But I love it," Hannibal said. "It's so wonderful, don't you think?"

"It is."

"Will." Hannibal turned to look at him. His eyes were stern. "I know we don't want things to turn out this way, but I need you to know this." He took back Will's hand and squeezed it. "I am willing to die for this. I am absolutely willing."

Will's stomach churned. "Hannibal..."

"If one of us has to die, for whatever reason, I'll do it. I'll move into our shared space inside your brain, and I'll allow my body to die. Or, if it makes more sense for one of us to be arrested, I'll make sure it's me." He paused. "I will confess for you. For us. I know Chilton's imprisonment has been bothering you. He's an innocent man. I will confess if it means you can live the life you wish."

"No." Will shut it down immediately. "This is the life I wish for. You and I in the same world. I don't want anything else."

"Even if it means the torture of an innocent man? Leaving your wife and stepchild behind?"

Will swallowed. Molly was important to him. She had always been good to him; he'd married her for a reason. She was a great person, and she didn't deserve to go through this. She didn't deserve to be left behind again.

But Will's life was never going to be the same. If he went back to Molly now, he would never be able to erase Hannibal from his head. He would have to face Molly every day with the knowledge that he was literally living in another man's head. That when either of them smiled, that same dopamine would flood through the other's head. The same went for tears, for anger, for love. Hannibal's misery inside a jail cell would transfer over to him — not to mention the misery he would feel on his own if he was separated from Hannibal once more.

"Even if," he replied. "Hannibal, I can't lose myself again. I can't lose you."

"The feeling is mutual." Hannibal stood, coming over to Will's chair and crouching down in front of him. He kissed Will's knuckles, a small smile forming on his Cupid's bow lips. "I love you."

Will felt a rush of adoration, likely a side effect of Hannibal's. "I love you, too, Hannibal."

"I am willing to give up everything for you. I am willing to give my life."

"You won't have to." Will leaned down to kiss his forehead. "If everything goes right, we won't have to."

"If not, let me have a backup plan." Hannibal placed his hand on Will's thigh. "If anything happens — if Jack finds us, if we're put into the spotlight, I am going to take all the blame. You can claim insanity or some type of Stockholm syndrome. You haven't murdered anyone, so you should do whatever you can to claim immunity."

"I don't want that." Will frowned. "I would be miserable."

"I just want you to be safe. If you don't want to live like that, you can travel back into my head. We can live there."

"We deserve a life of our own."

"The world doesn't understand. They never will." Hannibal glanced down at the floor, and then a flicker of recognition moved through his eyes. "The LOOM," he said. "We have to destroy it. Get rid of the evidence."

"Right. Yeah." Will sighed. "Are we confident in our ability to exist without it?"

"Should we test it?"

"Sure. Try to get into yours."

They both closed their eyes, and Will tried to conjure the feeling of cool water on his shins. The smell of brightly colored flowers, the rush of a nice breeze, all the beautiful greenery. He breathed deeply, hoping to find Hannibal in this world.

When he opened his eyes, he was standing in the creek. Without stopping to think, to get a sense of his surroundings, he stumbled out of the water and towards the mansion's set of back doors. When he turned the knob, he found Hannibal at the other side of the door, having

rushed towards the same place. They both relaxed, smiling; in another blink, they were back in Hannibal's real home. Hannibal was crouched in front of him, love in his eyes.

"We're good at this," he quipped, and Will grinned.

"Where's the LOOM?" Will asked, standing. "Let's go destroy it."

_____

Will and Hannibal stood in Hannibal's backyard, each of them holding their respective helmets. They stared down at the shining domes, and Will ran his thumb along it.

"This thing saved my life," he said, "when you think about it."

"Don't think of it as destruction. We're just preventing anyone else from becoming like us. We should be the only ones with this power."

"Oh, you could give everyone in the world one of these and they wouldn't turn out like us. We're just us."

Both of them set the helmets down on the ground, watching the moon reflect off of the metal. They picked up their hammers.

"This could be a good source of anger relief," Hannibal said, gripping the hammer tightly. "But be careful. I don't want you to lose a finger."

"Same goes for you. Those are your killing hands."

They shared a glance. Then they brought the hammers down.

It took a few tries to really smash into the metal, but eventually they started making dents. Over and over again they brought their mallets down onto the helmets, grunting in exertion. Will eventually knelt on the ground, making many shorter blows, watching the device collapse underneath the weight of the tool.

He looked up at Hannibal, marveling at his sudden show of strength. His shirt sleeves were rolled up to his forearms, and the muscles of his forearms flexed with every swing. His jaw was set, teeth clenched behind his closed mouth, and there was a coldness in his eyes that Will wasn't used to. He began to remember the sight of those forearms around Miriam Lass's neck, choking her until she stopped breathing entirely. He wondered if Hannibal's heart rate was as slow now as it had been then. Like killing an innocent person was somehow so dull that it didn't even excite him anymore. Not in the slightest. Not even enough to make his heart race.

They kept going, refusing to stop until the devices were smashed into pieces underneath them. They took garden shears to the wires, smashed every chip to smithereens. There was no way the thing was ever going to be fixed.

They gathered up the pieces and buried them underneath the plants. The dirt was already unsettled enough for it to look natural, and no one would think to look under there. The space

wasn't big enough for a body. Even if someone did find it, Will and Hannibal would be long gone by then.

They straightened up off the ground and wiped the dirt from their hands. Will sighed, a massive weight off of his shoulders.

"I think we're good, then," he said. He stared at Hannibal for a long time, considering the question in his mind. "Hannibal. When you kill...does it excite you? Does it get your heart racing?"

"It's the opposite." Hannibal looked into his eyes. His were still rather cold, calculating. "Killing calms me. The weight of another human body collapsing under my power astonishes me, brings me into a sort of dreamlike state. It's the parts that come next that can make my heart race. The preparation, the sculpture, the feast." He cradled Will's head with his hand, thumb brushing against his ear. "I'm so happy that I finally have someone to enjoy it with."

Will put his hand on Hannibal's waist. "I'm honored to enjoy it with you, Hannibal."

Hannibal smiled. The ice in his eyes melted into warm water. They kissed tenderly, and Will felt a joy so overwhelming that it nearly brought him to tears. It made him gasp for air, and he pulled away to look at Hannibal with wide eyes.

"Is that--" He swallowed. "Is that how you feel about me? About having me here?"

"Every moment I lay my eyes on you."

Will leaned against him. "This has to go well," he said. "It has to. Otherwise, I don't think I want to live anymore."

"It will go well. We'll make sure of it." Hannibal rubbed his back. "And I am willing to do anything to make it work." He spoke softly in Will's ear. "Are you?"

Will felt faint, Hannibal's strength in that moment completely overwhelming his. He felt Hannibal's conviction in all his heart, and it scared him. Hannibal held him tightly, and he had to support Will to make sure he didn't fall over. It was a strange mix of terror and adoration, and Will loved the feeling of it.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, anything."

"Good."

XXVI - The Heart

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

April 28, 2030

I fear that I've become too careless. I feel their eyes honing in on me, and I need to do something about it. If they're going to find me, I might as well make things difficult for them.

I invite Frederick Chilton over for dinner. He knows little of my deception. I would say he knows nothing, but I suspect that there's a part of him that knows what I truly am. I am not yet sure if he's accepting it.

I fix him a grand, beautiful meal, as is typical. I get a feel for what he knows, and I decide it's too much. I wait until the next day, and I follow him home from his workplace, trailing two cars behind until I witness him pull into a neighborhood. I don't follow him in there until I'm sure he won't notice me.

I watch him pull into a driveway, and then I wait at the end of the neighborhood until the sun sets. I then make the trek to his backyard and hide among the trees.

He goes out to get the mail, and I slip in the front door when he's halfway down the driveway. I silently slip into the guest room — the room that appears the least lived in, the shiniest — and hide in the closet.

Frederick returns. I slip a mask over my head; I don't want him to see my face. Once I hear him doing dishes in the kitchen, I creep out there and break into a run before he can turn around. I have mastered the art of knocking someone unconscious. I am a tightrope walker, suspended hundreds of feet in the air between making them faint and killing them, and I am always doing wonderfully.

I splash water from the kitchen sink onto the floor, and then I push back the sleeves of his jacket. I retrieve the clothes I brought, the ones I'm going to give to Miriam Lass to change into, and I rub them vigorously across Frederick's arms. The skin cells settle in much better that way.

Frederick has a small cut on his head. I spread some of the blood onto the edge of the counter, completing the facade that he's fallen, and then I seal the deal by smearing a minuscule amount on Miriam's new clothes. Quickly, I scan for any evidence of me being there, and when I find none I leave out the garage door as fast as possible. No one will ever know I was there, and I have the evidence I need.

I take the bag of product and shove it into the extra freezer in Frederick's garage. Everything in there is covered in ice crystals, untouched for a long while — it's a perfect place to hide the meat. They will find it before he has the chance to.

I take note of the brand of his tires on the way out. Come tomorrow, I'll have the same ones.

It is foolproof. It is genius. It is calculated. This is my design.

_____

"Do you feel ready?"

Hannibal kept his hand lingering on the front door knob, eyeing Will with concern. Will looked down at the messy duffel bag. He'd sneaked into his own house the previous day, while Molly was at work, and put together a haphazard suitcase to make it look like he'd been at the cabin for a week. He needed to keep up the image.

"I don't know," he said. "Do you?"

"I'm not the one stepping into the line of fire."

Will gazed out the window and frowned at the rising sun. He was expected back at work in two hours. He was expected home any minute now.

"You're going to be alright," Hannibal said. "Close your eyes, and I'll be there. That's all it takes now."

"I don't know if I'm going to be able to act naturally. Not after all of this. And God knows how Molly will act." He rubbed his forehead. "She'll probably lose her shit."

"Maybe that's a good thing. It makes leaving easier, and more plausible." Hannibal put his hand on Will's shoulder. "But, Will, your escape relies on you acting as natural as possible. You are a man that has been mentally broken. You are not a man with someone else in your life."

"Right."

"If something happens, I'll know. You won't have to alert me. We'll talk about what to do once you find the time to drift off."

"Right. All I have to do is make it through the days." Will smiled humorlessly. "You'll be there at night. Like we said, we won't ever be apart again."

"Never." Hannibal leaned in and kissed him on the forehead. "You're going to do fine. I'll see you very soon."

He finally turned the doorknob. Will's eyes ached from seeing the sun for the first time in days, and he felt the hairs on his arms stand up with the sudden breeze. He was so used to hibernating inside of the house, with his only glimpses of the outside world still being an illusion. Now he felt like he was being sent into the wild.

He held onto his keys with a tight grip as he walked a few blocks to his car. He couldn't shake the feeling that he was being watched, like there was something he needed to hide from. He hadn't done anything wrong -- or, at least, nothing that the police should know about. But he

was so exposed out here. He had to remind himself that the rest of the world couldn't read him as well as Hannibal could. They wouldn't notice the intricacies of his fear, the parts of him that he was desperately trying to keep hidden.

Molly might. And that was going to be a problem.

Finally back inside of his car, Will cranked up the air conditioning to stop his endless sweating. It wasn't a long drive, and he wished that it could last for hours. Anything to delay this.

He was dreading the collision of the old life and the new. The two were so different, and they were unable to coexist. He couldn't have Molly and Hannibal. He couldn't have a typical life and also be happy. If he stayed with Molly, he would be a functioning member of society; he would be safer, but he would be miserable. He had to take the risks that would come with peace.

His house was no longer welcoming. He felt like he'd become detached from it, torn away like a mouse from a glue trap, and now his skin was raw and wounded. He was walking into uncharted territory now. He pulled into the driveway, taking a final deep breath, and as he fumbled to take the keys from the ignition he noticed Molly sitting out on the front porch. He grabbed the duffel bag from the passenger seat and got out, walking up to where she sat.

Molly looked a little worse for wear. She hadn't showered in a few days, and there were circles under her eyes. She was still in her pajamas, having stayed home from work to welcome Will back home. When she told him about that plan, he felt a pang of guilt; she was still going out of her way for him, and he was away having sex with a serial killer. He was a great husband.

Loneliness festered inside of him. He knew that was thanks to Hannibal, who was now sitting alone in his house for the first time in a while. It must have hurt to see Will walk away after everything they'd been through. It hurt for Will, and he hadn't been pining for five years.

He trudged up the steps and took a seat next to Molly, clutching the duffel bag in his lap. She rested her head on his shoulder, and the two breathed together.

"Hey," he said after a while. He hardly recognized his own voice.

"...Hey." Molly took his hand, which he held weakly. "How are you feeling?"

"...I don't know," he replied. It was an honest answer.

"Do you think it helped you at all? Or did you waste your time?"

"I think I needed to get away for a little while. After everything that's been happening."

"Jack is worried about you. He told me he wants to have a long talk with you."

"That's exciting." Will sighed. "I might not make it home alive this evening."

"If he kills you, I'll make him give me another seventy-five grand."

"He won't kill me. Might fire me, though."

"Do you think you deserve to be fired?"

"I technically put myself into this mess. I agreed knowing the potential side effects."

"Can you tell me about the side effects?" She turned to look at him with concern written in her face. "I want to know what's been bothering you. I've seen it, but you haven't really told me."

Will felt a minuscule shift in his brain, like another part of him had finally been reactivated. Hannibal was paying attention now. It was both ominous and comforting to have him so close. "Well," he said, "it's been a lot. But the main issue is a sort of depersonalization. I don't feel like I am one person anymore." He leaned forward, placing his elbows on his knees. "I'm an amalgamation of thoughts and feelings. I'm a poorly constructed house of straw."

"Like you can't remember things about yourself?"

"I'm remembering lots of things. But the issue is that not all of the memories are mine. Some of them are Hannibal's." He searched for the right way to put things without incriminating themselves too much. "I dream of things that I have no way of knowing about. I see life through his eyes for a moment."

"Through the eyes of a serial killer?" Worry shot through her tone.

"No, not like that. Not like I'm murdering anyone." It was a miracle Will didn't blush. He'd grown accustomed to lying now. "But like I'm walking around in his memories as him. I'm studying at Johns Hopkins, or I'm speaking to a patient. None of the memories are solid, though. And I haven't seen anything incriminating."

"That might be worse." Molly grimaced. "Like killing means so little to him that he doesn't even bother to remember it."

"I don't know. I don't think I'm allowed to speculate."

"You were fine speculating before." She eyed him warily. "You were convinced it was him a week ago. Wouldn't hear it any other way."

"Well, I've had time to think about it. To see things differently. To walk through parts of his brain." Will shrugged. "I don't think he's done anything wrong."

A flush of relief ran through his mind. He could nearly feel Hannibal's shoulders relaxing, and a hint of pride blossomed in his chest. He was proud of himself. More importantly, Hannibal was proud of him.

"That could easily be because of his manipulation, though. Don't you think? His memories are clearly biased. If he doesn't think he's done anything wrong, then neither will you."

"I still have enough of my own strength to realize when I'm being manipulated. I think I've come to these conclusions all on my own."

Molly didn't answer for a while. She closed her eyes, thinking things over, and Will relished in the silence. He could almost imagine he was sitting next to someone else.

"I'm worried about you," she finally said. "I still don't know how to explain things to Walter, so I've been telling him that you're on a work trip." She turned her palms up. "How in the hell am I supposed to take all of this? How do I process what's going on in your head?"

"It's been pretty difficult to process myself, Molly. It's my head." Will frowned. "I just got home. I don't want to fight."

"I'm not trying to fight. I just...I wanted to be excited to have you come home, Will. But I didn't know what to expect. You're not the same." Her voice began to waver a bit, which startled Will. He wasn't used to that from her. "And I know it's not your fault. You didn't ask for things to turn out this way."

"Hey, it's okay." Will reached for her, putting his arm around her. "I understand."

"I don't want to lose you. I don't want to watch you go insane."

"I'm not...do you think I'm going insane?"

"You're losing yourself. You've stepped away from me, from work. You're hallucinating. You're imagining things that aren't there. Maybe insane is the wrong word, but you're telling me that you're seeing another man's memories, Will. This is pretty off-the-wall."

"I've changed, Molly." Will stared straight ahead, afraid to look at her. "And I don't think I'm going to change back. I don't think this can be reversed."

"What did you see in there?" Molly asked. "The first time you went in. Or the time right before this all started, whatever made the most impact. What did you see that made your brain take this turn?"

Will considered this. It was a good point, something that he hadn't thought much about. When he closed his eyes, Hannibal was waiting for him inside of his brain, idly running his fingers along the palm of Will's hand. Will felt chills run up his body in the real world, and he could only imagine what it looked like to Molly.

"You saw me cooking," Hannibal said. "Remember? Tending to the meat?"

Will only thought the word *yes*. He couldn't risk accidentally saying it aloud.

"But you can't tell her that. I mean, you can, but that would obviously cause consequences for both of us. So you'll have to come up with another solution."

Will opened his eyes, once again blinded by the sun. He loved nature, and he loved the outdoors, but if it meant that he could be safe with Hannibal, he would give it all up. He would live inside his own brain forever, only seeing the sun in his imagination.

"I saw a brilliant and lonely man that had his entire life together except for his relationships," Will said. "He had a fulfilling career, wealth, shelter, plenty of talents. But his heart was

desolate. Not for lack of feeling, but because he had no one to put that feeling towards. He had so much love in his heart, but it was all going to waste." Will took the handle of the duffel bag and stood up. "I thought that we had that in common, a little bit. I guess making that connection was what bound us together."

Molly didn't say a word, and he didn't want to see the look on her face. He turned around, facing the front door.

"I have to go to work soon."

Chapter End Notes

Well, are you guys still liking it??? Probably got less than ten chapters left. I hope you're enjoying :) comments give me life so pls leave them

XXVII- The Dream

May 2, 2030

Back at work, Will did his best to change his attitude surrounding the case. He placed emphasis on Chilton's guilt, highlighting the DNA evidence and the motives that he could potentially have. he steered the eyes of the FBI away from Hannibal, coming up with potential alibis and showing them that Hannibal had no reason to do these types of things. Chilton was the more neurotic of the two. It made the most sense. He was refusing to confess, but that was likely due to stubbornness on his part, not innocence.

He thought he was doing a good job of it. He thought that everyone was off their backs. But apparently that wasn't the case.

"Hey. I've got a question for you," Jack said as Will walked into his office. "Something important."

"I'll do my best to answer."

"Our guys are going to be interviewing Frederick Chilton again today."

Will's blood ran cold, and he felt a jolt in his brain that signified Hannibal was feeling the same shock. "I-- Chilton? Did he finally talk?"

"No. That's the problem. We've got to get him to talk, though. With the way you've suddenly been firing in on him, I would appreciate some insight on what to do."

"Suddenly. What's that supposed to mean?"

"Your opinion on this case swiveled rather quickly, is what I'm saying."

Will's jaw clenched. "I considered the evidence. Isn't that what comes with the job?"

"Just recently, you were convinced that the evidence was a result of Chilton being framed. What changed your mind on that?"

"I've changed my mind on the job before."

"Not to this degree."

"Where is this coming from? I thought we were all satisfied with the Chilton angle."

"I'm never satisfied until the gavel hits the podium, Will. You started off with your eyes on Hannibal, and now you've turned into the complete opposite. I'm just trying to pinpoint why. I feel like you found something that you're afraid of telling me."

"What do you think I'm hiding exactly, Jack? What do you think I know?" Will narrowed his eyes, offended. "I'm not just gonna sit here and let you insinuate that--"

"Will, you just had to take a week off of work because your brain got too scrambled around," Jack snapped. "You hid things from me, you hid things from your wife. You were apparently running around and conducting your own investigation on Hannibal without my knowledge or permission. It's a miracle you're not fired right now."

"I told you what I thought was going on. You all wouldn't listen to me. You were convinced that Chilton was the culprit, and after some consideration, I am, too. But now you're back to being suspicious of Hannibal? You're the one that's taken a turn, too."

"I'm only asking what changed your mind."

"No, you think that something isn't right. If you were fully satisfied with Chilton as your answer, you wouldn't be having me interrogate him," Will said. "You think that something is amiss. You think he's not entirely to blame. So what do you want, Jack?"

"I want to know if Hannibal was one of your sources on this case."

Will let out an involuntary scoff, shaking his head. He was walking on thin ice right now. "Jack, seriously?"

"It's a completely messy situation, Will. I'm just searching for clarity. You came out of that room the day the evidence was found and begged me to consider Hannibal's guilt. Then you're gone for a week, supposedly talking to people you're not supposed to be talking to in secret, and now you've hardly brought up Hannibal's name."

"I haven't spoken to Hannibal at all. Every conversation we had was when he was here, and it was one-sided."

"I won't be angry if you did talk to him, Will. I just want to know what he told you."

"What answer do you want? I just denied it, and you aren't listening to that."

"I want to know who the Chesapeake Ripper is. That's all I want."

"Did the DNA evidence not leave you satisfied?"

"You weren't satisfied with DNA evidence. So, if you're telling the truth, and you haven't spoken to Hannibal, I want you to tell me what you saw." Jack's brows lowered, voice stern. "You need to tell me what happened, what you saw in that vivid brain of yours, to completely turn your mind around."

"My reservations about Hannibal were all based on intangible evidence. It was a feeling, a flash of a memory that I can't be certain about. But Chilton's skin cells were on Miriam's clothes." He tossed a lie around his brain, forming it into something smooth and believable. "When I was interviewing people Hannibal knew, none of them pinned him as someone who was capable of these types of things, either. He's not neurotic. He's not unstable. He's not arrogant."

"I agree. I really do agree with you, Will. But I've learned to trust your word throughout all the time you've worked here, and I can't seem to get your gut instinct out of my head. Especially without a confession from Chilton. There's part of me that still thinks Hannibal could be responsible, since Chilton has refused to crack all this time. Hell, even if Chilton took Miriam, that doesn't necessarily mean he's the Ripper."

"I'll interview Hannibal. We can get him talking more. Is he still silent?" He played dumb, trying to further prove that he knew little about the case. That he hadn't tried to speak to Hannibal.

"No, he's talking just like normal now," Jack replied, scoffing. "That's another part of this that isn't sitting right with me. I'm thinking that his little silent treatment was all an act."

"I don't really know how to feel about it, to be honest. I haven't formed an opinion on that part yet."

"Look, the reason I ask you is because I want to know what direction to take this case in." Jack gazed intently at him. "You get that, right? You know I trust your opinion?"

"I don't want to be the deciding factor in this case, Jack. I don't want you to base your actions off of just my opinion."

"I'm not going to do that. I'm just getting your opinion so I can weigh it with the rest. Weigh it with the evidence. And then hopefully use that to interrogate both Hannibal and Chilton effectively." Jack put his hands in his jacket pockets. "Gut instinct, Will. Be honest with me, please."

"It's Chilton." He didn't have time to consider it. The words spilled out of him with conviction, without much hesitation. It was a mixture of his own free will and Hannibal's influence inside his brain, making his opinion stronger than ever. The little part of him that was still interested in the greater good stood no chance against Hannibal's push. He had stepped off of the edge of the cliff.

Jack studied him for a moment, and then he nodded. "Okay," he replied. "We'll follow that lead."

"If you interview Hannibal again, let me know. He's more receptive to me than to the rest of you."

"Oh, I know." Jack narrowed his eyes, turning to leave the office. Will stared at his back with hatred. "And I would really like to know why that is."

There was a baby in the bathtub.

She was only about a year old, a beautiful child, so precious. Tufts of pale blonde hair stuck out from the top of her head, around her ears, and she was babbling with the most adorable voice. She splashed around in the lukewarm water, fascinated by the bubbles, and her brown eyes were lit up with childlike innocence. She looked at him, a grin full of tiny teeth spreading across her face, and she reached for him with tiny hands. He couldn't help but smile back, splashing more water onto her chubby body and making sure she was wiped free of all the suds.

He was happy. This girl was the most beautiful child he'd ever seen. He kissed her on the forehead and blew raspberries on her cheeks, making her shriek with laughter. While she kicked and giggled, he lifted her out of the tub and hugged her tightly. She was warm and damp in his arms, and she was tugging playfully at his hair, but he didn't mind.

Her laughter echoed through the room, which made the sudden silence even more prominent when she vanished.

His arms were suddenly empty in the blink of an eye, and he collapsed in on himself as he no longer had anything there to support him. He gasped, clawing at the air to find her again -- his first thought was that she had just slipped, maybe fallen out of his arms and was trying to run for the living room. But that wasn't the case; he heard no baby footsteps on the tile, no tiny giggles of mischief.

"Mischa," he called out. "Mischa?"

Nothing. There was no answer from anywhere in the house, not a sound to make him believe that he wasn't alone. Everything seemed so desolate all of a sudden, and he felt something churning inside of him.

He called out for his mother and father. No one answered.

There was a high-pitched shriek of pure, abject terror. He swiveled around at the noise, and the floor fell out from under him, leaving him falling towards a vast nothingness. He stuck out his arms, hoping to catch his fall once he finally hit the bottom, and in an instant he was transported somewhere else. He fell into a field of deep snow, sinking up to his elbows, and he shivered at the sudden freeze as he scrambled to his feet. He felt like his body had stretched; he was older now, years older, and so was she. His voice was deeper, and her screams, while innocent, were much older than that of a one-year-old. It had merely been a memory.

"Mischa," he called out. "*Kur tu esi*?"

She screamed again. There were tears in her voice now, a thickness in her throat. She was sobbing, wailing, desperately calling out for him, and he had to find her.

He ran towards the sound, needing with all of his heart for there to be hope for her. She must have slipped from his grasp when he wasn't paying attention, fallen into the snow and got hurt, but there was still hope. She was going to be okay. He could still protect her. He could take her inside and bandage her up, take her to the hospital in the worst case scenario, but he would always be there for her. It had never been any other way. Five years, and he had always looked after her with all of his power.

The screams were coming from the barn. He ran as fast as he could in the deep snow, but it showed no signs of clearing up. It was now climbing up past his knees, up to his thighs, his waist. The barn wasn't getting any closer; if anything, it was shrinking before him, a never-ending trail. He was never going to be there in time. She was calling for him, and the snow was now up to his chest, and he wasn't going to be able to move.

His face felt cold. He realized it was from tears freezing on his face as soon as they left his eyes. There was nothing he could do. She was hurt, and for the first time ever, he wasn't there for her.

"Mischa!" His voice cracked. He couldn't handle this. He could see the barn. It was so close, yet so far away. He felt so powerless to stop whatever was happening. "*Aš esu čia*!" He reached his arm up, but that was the only thing he could do.

She screamed again, and it was the most guttural shriek of pain and terror that he'd ever heard. He let out a despairing cry of his own, sobbing, but he knew that it was too late. He had failed.

The pure, white snow in front of the barn was suddenly overwhelmed with a splash of crimson blood. He crumbled at the sight, becoming buried deeply in the snow and weeping with grief. He was a failure. He was a horrible, horrible failure.

He tasted copper in his mouth. The snow began to cave in on him, quickly trapping him under the heavy, packed ice, and the more he fought to dig his way out the harder it became. He was drowning. He couldn't breathe without inhaling tiny ice crystals. He opened his mouth to scream, but all that did was fill his mouth with thick snow. As it hit his tongue, it tasted like raw meat, disgusting muscle and sinew between his teeth. He couldn't spit it out. With every movement of his jaw, blood spurted into his mouth and down his throat. Mischa was still screaming.

Mischa. Mischa is screaming. There's nothing you can do anymore. There's nothing you can do. What are you doing? What is wrong with you? What are you doing--

"Will! What the fuck are you doing?!"

Someone was shaking Will awake, jolting him out of an extremely deep slumber. His heart nearly jumped out of his chest, and he felt the rush of the outdoors hit his uncovered body. He was wearing nothing but boxers, his feet bare, and he was drenched in sweat. Now that he was outside with his feet in the wet grass, that layer of sweat on his body was chilling him.

Molly's hands were on his arms, and she was saying something to him. He wasn't picking up on any of it. It was all muffled. There were tears flowing down his face, his soul heavy with despair. He couldn't stop crying.

"Mischa," he said to himself.

He closed his eyes, and without warning he was in Hannibal's body. He was in Hannibal's bed, alone, sitting upright with his arms wrapped around himself. Tears dripped from his face down onto the blankets.

I'm sorry, he whispered with Hannibal's voice. *Love, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to--*

"You don't have to be sorry, Will, just tell me what's going on. Please, Will, calm down."

He was back in the backyard. He was himself again. Will closed his mouth, taking a few breaths to try and control himself. He had never felt this devastated before.

"I think..." Will's mouth was as dry as bone. He coughed. "All I know was that I was having a really bad dream. It was terrible."

"You kept saying someone's name. You jumped out of bed and ran outside like you were chasing something."

"Yeah. There was— it was a little girl. Screaming for help. I could have sworn it was real. It sounded so real."

"Why are you crying?"

"I don't know," Will lied. "I need some water."

Molly followed him in, standing in the kitchen doorway while Will fixed himself a glass of water. He chugged it in one go, ignoring the burning cold, and he gasped for air once he was done.

"I'm worried about you, Will."

"It was just a bad dream. I'm used to them."

Molly crossed her arms. "You were muttering to yourself. Kept saying someone's name, and some other words. It was like you were speaking another language."

"Probably just sleep talking. What name?"

"Mischa."

"Yeah. Yeah, that was the girl's name." Will put his glass in the sink. "She was one of the Ripper victims." It was easier to lie than to try and explain himself. "Died pretty brutally."

"I really don't think this is good for you. Any of this. It's not helping your already fragile brain."

"My brain is tired right now. I want to go to bed." He walked past her, turning in the hallway and looking at her expectantly. "Are you coming?" He knew he was being dismissive, outright rude, but he didn't care anymore. He was sick of being around someone who didn't understand, someone that he had to constantly lie to. Molly would never fully comprehend

what was going on inside his head, how absolutely beautiful it was. This connection with Hannibal, being able to transport himself inside this newly shared space where both of them could feel the same feelings and communicate in real time, was marvelous. Breathtaking. But Molly, and everyone else in the world, would see it as insanity.

Molly pressed her lips together and silently followed. They climbed back into bed, and she turned her back to him. Will was fine with that; he just needed to be there for Hannibal. He closed his eyes, praying for the solace of the creek.

He slipped into a dreamlike state rather quickly, and he found himself laying in the green grass, surrounded by bright flowers and fat bumblebees. He ran right for the palace upon standing, and when he opened the door he heard the faint sound of music floating through the hall. He went towards it.

Hannibal sat at the harpsichord, plunking out a dejected melody. His head was hung, and he didn't seem to notice or care about Will's entrance. Will approached slowly, and when he reached the bench he cleared his throat. Hannibal didn't startle; he just looked up at Will with a profound sadness in his eyes.

"I'm very sorry," Hannibal said softly. "I didn't expect this. I guess it only makes sense that we would share dreams."

"I feel terrible that I can't be there physically. You're upset."

"You will be soon. This is for the greater good."

"Not for the greater good of the world," Will replied, "but for us."

"Right."

Will sat next to him. "Do you want to tell me what happened?"

"I don't think I can right now, no."

"Okay." Will considered his words before he said them. He didn't want to intrude. "You're not a failure, though."

Hannibal shook his head. "No, I failed her. She was my world, and I failed her." He looked over at Will. "I don't want to fail you."

"You haven't failed me, and I promise you didn't fail her. I don't know what happened, but it looked like you were very young, too. You can't blame yourself for whatever happened to her."

"I loved her so much, Will." His voice wavered. "I was supposed to protect her. All I had to do was protect her, and I failed even at that. She was so small, so delicate. It shouldn't have been difficult. But the world was brutal to her, and I wasn't strong enough to save her."

"She loved you. I saw it, Hannibal, she loved you."

"I don't think she did in the end. She was probably so afraid, wondering where I was, wondering why I wasn't there for her."

"Hannibal, you can't do that to yourself." He wrapped his arms around Hannibal. "She was special. She loved you in a way that not many people could."

"My entire life, I thought that I'd never be able to love like that again. That no one would ever love me so strongly." He took Will's hand. "And then you came along. And I finally believed I could have the chance to be happy."

"You do. We both do."

"I know that now. I have hope for us. I miss you, Will."

"I miss you. I'm sorry I'm not there."

"Like I said, this is for the betterment of our story. You're doing a good job. Things aren't looking very secure out there between the two of you."

"Weirdly enough, it wasn't even intentional." Will's mouth twisted. "Things just keep happening on their own."

"Whatever the intention, it's working. I'd say we're close to being ready." Hannibal's eyes were full of adoration. "I'm getting my finances together, as much as I can without being suspicious, and I've got a new place in mind. You can stay with me for a little while; so we don't disappear one after the other immediately, and then I'll come up with an excuse to move. I'll put together your new identity next."

"I already have a new identity." Will smirked. "I've emerged from the cocoon."

"I'm proud of you." Hannibal leaned closer. "I appreciate you being here to check on me."

"I'm always here. I'll be here if you ever want to tell me what happened."

"Someday soon, I will." Hannibal kissed his cheek. "But not yet."

They sat close together for a long while, relishing their moment. Their bodies slept soundly for the rest of the night.

XXVIII- The Broken

Chapter Notes

> Sorry for the delay— I just got engaged!!! Very excited hehe but I’m also excited to be back and deliver you more content ;)

May 3, 2030

"What are you doing out here?"

Will opened his eyes, coming back to his real senses. There was a hard lawn chair underneath him, and it was uncomfortably chilly out on the back porch. The sky was grey, and light rain pattered down on the green grass. Molly was peeking out the back door, watching him.

"My plan was to watch the storm roll in," Will replied, "but it's proving to be really uneventful."

"Maybe you can come in and watch the paint dry, instead. Might be more fun."

"Maybe in a minute." Will wasn't in the mindset for witty banter. The moment before she walked out, he had been immersed in his palace — he'd been knee-deep in the creek, fishing rod in his hand, and when he turned around he saw Hannibal sitting on the grass watching him. It was a comforting sight, and now it was gone. Will hated leaving him alone in there, even if it was Hannibal's own personal heaven — he was used to being alone in there. It had been that way his whole life. But not, it felt different; he'd welcomed Will in because of how terribly lonely he was, and now Will was having to leave him behind every other hour.

"I've got something to say, but it's gonna start a fight." Molly took a seat in the chair next to him. "Are you feeling up for that?"

Will turned his palms up, sighing. "Why not. Better to just get it out there."

"I don't think you went to the cabin last week."

"Okay." Will scraped at the faded blue paint on the chair with his fingernails. "I don't know what you want me to say to that."

"Are you going to deny it?"

"Yes, because it's not true. I was at the cabin. But are you going to listen to that?"

"I want to."

"What makes you think I wasn't there, Molly?" He didn't have the strength to put any emotion in his voice. He didn't care. None of this mattered anymore — he needed to get away.

"I checked the bank account. You didn't put anything on your card at all that week. Not a thing. I don't think you packed a bag at all. Usually, the more troubled you are, the more hunt you come home with, and you didn't bring anything. You've got no mud on your walking boots."

"I didn't buy anything. I either didn't eat, or I paid in cash at that shady grocery store. I didn't want to tap into the money Jack gave us for something unnecessary." He shrugged, trying to seem nonchalant. "I didn't feel like hunting. I did pack a bag, but I wasn't in the right mind when I did it."

"It just...it doesn't seem right, Will. Especially with how much you were disappearing before then."

"Where do you think I was, Molly?" He glances over at her, doing his best to stop it from becoming an angry glare. "Really, where do you think I went, if not the cabin?"

"I don't know. I've got an idea in my head, but it's a pretty crazy one."

"Yeah?"

"There's a small part of me that thinks you were with Hannibal Lecter."

A large flake of paint detached from the chair, and Will flicked it onto the ground. "Okay. I'm not going to respond to that, because that's fucking ridiculous."

"I thought you'd be more defensive about it."

"What purpose would I have to spend time with Hannibal Lecter?" Will couldn't hold back the glare this time. "What fucking purpose, Molly?"

"There's nothing more intimate than literally being in the brain of another man," she said coldly. "And with the way you've been disappearing on me, withdrawing from everything...I don't think that things are as clear-cut as you've been saying."

"You think that we have some kind of thing going on? Me and Hannibal, the guy I thought was a serial killer? And that Jack still thinks could be the killer?"

"Jack thinks? You don't?"

"I've reviewed the evidence, and I think that I was going a little bit too far in my accusations. God forbid someone change their mind. Does it have to mean that we're involved?"

"I don't know, Will." Molly's voice was so exasperated that Will felt a pang of guilt. He didn't want to frustrate her. He didn't want to be an asshole. "But whatever is going on, you're not telling me the whole story."

Will opened his mouth to speak, but a buzzing in his pocket interrupted his thoughts. He reached for his phone, sighing. "That's Jack."

Molly just waved her hand dismissively, scoffing. He took that as a sign to answer the call, leaning back in his chair. "Hey."

"Hey. You doing okay?"

Will furrowed his brow. This was a strange question from Jack; he wasn't used to being asked how he was doing. Jack never cared about that. "You know. I'm surviving. What's going on?"

Jack hesitated. "Frederick Chilton is dead."

A shockwave radiated through Will's chest, and he felt like the air had been sucked out of him. His eyes widened. "He— what? What happened to him?"

"He hung himself in his cell." Jack's voice was exhausted. "It happened sometime overnight. I guess the interview got to him."

"Fuck," Will whispered. "Do you know how it went? What did they ask him?"

"Kept insisting it wasn't him, that he was being framed. He wouldn't listen to any of the evidence against him — just kept denying it. Him and his lawyer were confident that it was Hannibal Lecter's doing."

"What do we think now? Is this an admission of guilt?"

"You tell me. You're the profiler — I was hoping you could provide some insight."

Will considered his options. Calling it an admission would be a disrespect to a dead man. An innocent one, at that. It would be slander, immoral. But saying it wasn't that could implicate Hannibal. Judging from the pure shock that the news of Chilton's death had caused, Hannibal was completely uninvolved; any feelings Hannibal had couldn't be hidden from Will anymore.

"I think we need to talk to Hannibal Lecter again," Will said. "I think we need to gather rock solid alibis, get an explanation for all the evidence. Once we have that, we can completely say it was an admission of guilt. Until then, I can't be certain of anything."

"So now your eyes are on Hannibal again?"

"I'm being cautious about it, but maybe. I don't want to say anything for sure, but this entire situation is so fucking weird."

"What about the LOOM? Do you think you'd be up for using it again?"

Will tensed at the name. "What would that do?"

"Maybe now that he's talking, that he trusts you a little more, he'll reveal something new."

"We'll need his consent first, so I'd have to go talk to him, anyway." Will rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Let me talk to him, okay, Jack? Let me be at the forefront of the house visit. He likes me."

"Okay. Sorry, but you're gonna have to come in tomorrow. Same time as usual. We'll go to his house, catch him when he's not at work, and just ask him some questions. Let him know the news. Sound good?"

"Sounds good."

Will set the phone down, jaw set. His head was pounding rhythmically, Hannibal's pacing footsteps resounding through the empty palace. He was anxious. Molly stared at him.

"What was that about?"

"Chilton died last night. Killed himself."

"Oh, shit." Molly gasped. "You know that for sure?"

"He hung himself. They want me to come in tomorrow so I can go talk to Hannibal."

"Oh, God, you have to go talk to him?" Molly shook her head. "I don't want you doing that."

"I know, but I have to. He trusts me the most. I need to go let him know what's going on in the case and in my head. I want to know if he's imagining me, too."

"Don't let yourself be that vulnerable around him. That's dangerous as hell. You know that he could use that to his advantage if he really is that cold-blooded? What if he's the killer?"

"If he is, then we're gonna catch him. If he's not, then we need to prove him innocent and make sure every suspicion against him is taken care of. He doesn't deserve the public attention if he's really innocent."

"You can't keep doing this, Will. You're already too close to this case. It's not good for you."

"Can't hurt to get a little closer. I'm already in the trenches." Will closed his eyes. "I need to think."

"Always thinking nowadays." Molly stood. "Come back in when you're ready to act normal again."

"Molly." Will didn't look at her, but he could sense her halt halfway to the door. "Do you think things between us are too different to fix now?"

She didn't answer for a long time. When she did, her voice was quiet. "...I don't know, Will. Do you?"

"I don't know."

Molly went back inside. Rather than go back in to comfort her, Will sought out the creek.

Hannibal sat at his harpsichord, gaze trained at the door as if he was waiting on Will to arrive. He was looking sharp as always, put together and seemingly unfazed by the situation — that is, until Will got closer. His eyes had a hint of worry. Will sat next to him, placing his hands on his thighs. He was wearing the same clothes as he had on the porch, jeans and a button-down, much different from the impeccable suit he always wore in the palace. Hannibal was also a lot more dressed down. They'd been so desperate to find each other that Hannibal hadn't had the heart to conjure up their outfits.

"I trust you have your reasons behind leading Jack to my doorstep."

"Thank you for trusting me."

"You've set their eyes on me, Will. I would like to know why."

"Their eyes were already on you, Hannibal. They've been on you for weeks. We need to prove them wrong entirely." Will put his hand on Hannibal's cheek, turning his face to make him look Will in the eyes. "We need an experienced profiler to interview you, to look you in the face and assure the FBI with all the confidence in his heart that you're not lying to them. That you're innocent."

"Do you expect Jack to believe you? After all of this?" Hannibal frowned. "The way I see it, this is a trap. He is luring you into a situation to prove that we are conspiring, sharing secrets."

"If that is the case, then it shouldn't matter in the long run. I'll be gone before he can say much about it."

"We've come too close to lose things now. We can't let this get out of hand. They'll take us away from each other."

"They can't. Not anymore. We'll never be away from each other again."

"I will not let them." Hannibal clenched his hands into fists so tightly that they began to shake. "I never truly apologized for last night. I had no clue that my nightmares would transfer to you, and I'm sorry for that. That was a part of me I didn't want you to see. It won't happen again."

"You don't have anything to apologize for. Your emotions are going to emerge at some point, no matter what. I'm surprised it took this long."

"Oh, Will, I've done it before. The first time we met in Italy, when you started to understand who I was, I held my beating heart out to you on my palm. It was the most terrifying thing I've ever done. But you lashed out, clawed it open like a fearful animal, and I lost myself. My emotions got the best of me."

"Have you been trying to control yourself ever since?"

"Trying is the key word. I don't think I've done a very good job of it," Hannibal admitted. "My advances thus far have been intense. I know that. But if I were to put my true feelings for you into words, I fear you would run away from me again."

"Tell me." Will put his hand on Hannibal's chest. "You have to tell me. Please."

"I will tear my own chest open and offer my rib to God before I lose you again, Will. If I cannot have you, there will be blood. And this love, this violence, is more fragile than anything I've ever felt — but it's also the strongest feeling I've ever had."

"It's vulnerable. You feel susceptible to pain when I'm around. Without me, there would be no chance to lose me. No chance to be hurt."

"But it would mean there's no you. And I can't handle that."

"Being in your head means that I am going to see every part of you, Hannibal. There's no way around it. You agreed to that when you first agreed to use the LOOM." He smirked. "You knew I would find out who you are. What you do. And you agreed to it anyway."

"I knew you would find out eventually, yes. Perhaps not as quickly or directly as you actually did, but I still expected it. I trusted you to keep my secret. I trusted you to find yourself again."

"That's a bold move. What if I didn't find out? What if I realized who you were and didn't recognize any of it? Turned you in and moved on?"

"Then it would have been worth it to see you one last time. But I knew you would come to your senses."

"That's the beauty of the LOOM, isn't it? There aren't any secrets. No matter how much you try to hide your feelings about me, you can't. They will always emerge. And you have to be okay with that."

"I am." Hannibal smiled softly at him, tears forming in his eyes. "I love you, Will."

"I love you. You have to trust me, Hannibal, as you always do. Jack wants an interview. He wants your consent to use the LOOM again. And we're going to."

"What purpose will that serve?"

"We're going to finish the job." Will heard the distant crackle of thunder, so far outside his range of hearing that he knew it came from the real world, not the palace. His life was calling to him, and he was running out of time. "And tonight, I'll tell you how."

"Come back to me, Will."

"Always." Will kissed him on the lips. "Always, Hannibal."

XXVIV- The Plan

1. Direct the FBI's attention back to Hannibal — WITHOUT SUSPICION. Get a private interview between the two of us. Make it seem like you're just covering your bases.
2. Gain Hannibal's explicit consent, even desire, to use the LOOM. Hannibal should act just shifty enough to make the FBI want to take him up on it. He knows the art of deception well enough to do this. (Will should be hesitant. It makes the entire thing seem much less intentional.)
3. Get the two of us into a lab and onto a LOOM chair. Become One. And run.

_____

May 4, 2030

Will came into work the next day with massive bags under his eyes. His rest the previous night was fitful, and he couldn't bring himself to sleep peacefully with Molly so close to him. He knew that he was betraying her, and that was hurtful. Choosing a side was easy from the outside, but the meaning behind it was finally starting to hit him. Choosing Hannibal, being the kind of person that he really wanted to be, would also mean leaving behind Molly. He'd been married to her for years, and he was about to toss it all to the side to run away with someone he'd only known for a fraction of the time. That, and he was a serial killer.

Molly would likely be devastated. She was going to be left behind all over again, abandoned by the person she loved -- and this time, it was for an arguably worse reason. Her previous husband had died while they were married. She still loved him, and getting over that loss was a monumental task that she still struggled with. Will had built her up and helped her through the hard times, but now he was going to abandon her because she wasn't good enough for him. At least, that was how she would see things. No matter what, this decision wasn't fair.

To make things worse, Hannibal had been awake all night. It didn't stop Will from sleeping altogether, but when he woke the next morning he felt like he had been on overdrive for eight hours. It made sense why Hannibal did it -- he wanted to be amply prepared for the interview -- but Will was also paying the price for it.

He got in his car and left without saying goodbye to Molly. He didn't feel like waking her up, and he didn't have the heart to go through the motions of small talk. He would be back that evening, and they could talk then.

"We need to clear up a few things," Jack said the moment Will stepped into his office. Will stuffed his hands in his coat pockets.

"Okay."

"I'm going to ask you some questions, and you need to be completely honest with me, Will. Any lie, and I'll find out, and you'll have even more explaining to do."

"I'm always honest, Jack. I don't know what I did to convince you otherwise."

Jack didn't respond to that. "Outside of the conversations you had in the LOOM, inside of this FBI headquarters, have you had any direct contact with Hannibal Lecter?"

"No. I don't even know where he lives."

"Have you spoken to him online, over the phone, or through any other method?"

"No."

"You have no personal connection to Hannibal Lecter, from either before, during, or after the LOOM usage?"

"I have no personal connection at all." It was easier to lie now. Hannibal's skills, his nonchalance, had transferred to him. It made him less anxious now.

Jack studied him, eventually nodding with hesitant satisfaction. "I won't be angry if you've been speaking to him, Will. But I need to know."

"I've spoken to people he knows, but I haven't had the chance to speak to him. I have absolutely no reason to be in bed with Hannibal Lecter and not tell you about it."

Oh, you were in bed with me, alright. He could tell Hannibal was smirking. Will hoped that he wasn't visibly blushing.

"Okay, Will. Next up. Have you been having any side effects from the LOOM, such as," Jack paused, leaning over his desk to read from a piece of paper, "migraines, hallucinations, heart palpitations, seizures, fainting, nausea or vomiting, de-personalization or de-realization, lack of muscle control, or night terrors? Christ."

"I had one hallucination." Partial honesty was the best way about this.

"Tell me about that."

Will swallowed. He didn't want to divulge his sexual fantasies to his boss. "I imagined Hannibal in Molly's place at one point. Her voice turned into his. But it was only for a moment, and it hasn't happened since."

"Was it distressing?"

"I mean, about as much as hallucinating would be for anyone. It was confusing. Other than that, I've had some headaches and trouble sleeping. But that's always been with me." Will shrugged. "I live on a diet of aspirin, Jack. Sometimes fish."

"Have you experienced any sleepwalking?"

"Once or twice. But it wasn't anything wild."

"Okay. Zeller wanted me to ask, since this thing is still being tested. I'll let you know what he says."

"Do you really think it's a good idea to use this thing again?"

"I think we have to gauge the situation first. We need to figure out if it's even worth the effort. That's why you're going to his house, remember?"

"I know that, Jack. But if it turns out that we need to use it. I don't know if it would be good for my brain." *Good hesitancy.*

"It might not even happen, Will. It's a bridge we need to cross later on. I can't have it clouding your mind for this interview." Jack rapped his knuckles on the desk. "You need to go in there with confidence. You need to give Hannibal Lecter the facts, tell him that all eyes are on him, and let him know that we aren't gonna take any more bullshit from him. His act of silence was a way to gain sympathy, but that's not going to work anymore."

"What do you expect to hear from him? What do you want to hear?"

"I want concrete alibis for a majority of the nights of the murders, if not all of them. I want reasoning behind the meat in his fridge, a plausible way for Chilton to have gotten in and planted things there. I want an explanation for his suspicious behavior."

"Things don't usually go that smoothly, Jack."

"I know. And that's what I'm expecting." Jack's upper lip curled. "Much different than wanting."

"Are you going to have officers in there with me?"

"Yes. We'll have a few men standing guard."

"Great. I don't want them there."

"What?"

"If you insist on having them there, I don't want him to know about them. I want them hidden. I'll wear a wire. Something like that. I want the most honest answers from him possible, and he's less likely to clam up if it's just me. If something happens, you can have people right outside. We need to lull him into a sense of security, Jack. If a bunch of officers show up at his door, it's a threat. If it's just me, a man that's been in his brain and that I think he considers a potential friend, it's a visit."

"You want to treat it like it's something conversational?" He raised an eyebrow, bemused.

"I think it's better than cornering him. Threatened animals lash out."

"Should we treat it like something unexpected? Just a confused potential friend stopping by on the weekend, wanting to talk about everything that's happened?"

"Something like that, yes. You get more personal answers that way." Will could sense the anticipation brewing in his and Hannibal's minds. Hannibal, of course, was aware of every word being exchanged right now; that was the way things were supposed to go. They were putting on an act. Will had to seem like he was doing what was best for the FBI, not for Hannibal. He needed Jack to think he was on his side.

"It's dangerous. He could snap in an instant."

"Then you'll catch him. You'll have him on recording murdering me in cold blood. But he's not going to do that." Will smirked. "He likes me too much. I could tell from the way he spoke to me in there."

"What does he think of you?"

"He sees me as a pawn to play with. Someone he can manipulate. He would never discard the opportunity to do that."

"He wants to be the one in charge."

"Exactly. And by doing this, by putting me in a room alone with him, we're doing just that. Little does he know, we'll have the upper hand."

"If something happens to you--"

"If it does, then you can pay for my funeral. Cool?"

Jack shook his head. "You're impossible."

"Better than being manipulated." Will shrugged. "Am I going or not?"

———

"Look okay?" Will adjusted his shirt one more time, making sure that the wire wasn't sticking out too much. It didn't really matter -- Hannibal knew about it anyway -- but he had to keep up the image.

"Pretty good," Jack replied. He was talking to Will on the phone, making it seem like he'd driven here alone. "Okay, so we've got the van waiting just around the corner, close but invisible from his house. While you're talking, we may have some more guys creep close, depending on how the conversation goes. We're listening to every word. You know the code word if something goes awry. If the wire shuts down, or we go a few minutes without hearing anything from your end, we're coming in. You're here for a friendly conversation, not anything related to an interrogation. You want to know what's really going on. He has no idea you're wearing a wire, correct?"

"When the hell would I have told him? *How* the hell? I've been with you all morning."

"Hey, hey. Just checking. You good?"

"Good."

"Be careful, Will." Jack said to Will as he opened the car door.

"Got it."

Will hung up the phone and kept a straight face as he walked across the sidewalk. He knew he was being watched, and he had to make every moment seem genuine.

I knew you would come back to me. Will relaxed at the sound of Hannibal's voice inside his mind. *We're so close, love.*

He raised his hand and knocked on the front door, which Hannibal was already patiently waiting behind. The look on his face was real confusion, real recognition of someone he hadn't seen in a long while. He was nothing if not a terrific actor; he had to be, if he got away with murder for this long. Will nodded at him.

"Doctor Lecter."

"Will Graham." Hannibal looked him up and down. "I was beginning to think I would never hear from you again."

"Good to see you, Doctor." Will held out his hand, and Hannibal shook it. He gave Will's hand an extra squeeze, a hint of relief in his eyes. "I was hoping we could talk about some things." He gave an awkward pause. "Off the record."

"Is anyone else with you?" Hannibal made the effort to peek around the doorway, looking for the police. "This isn't an interrogation?"

"I'm being interrogative. But this is all me. I just...I don't think things ended well between us. And I owe you an apology."

Hannibal stepped aside. "Why don't you come in?"

Once the front door was shut, Hannibal stepped away from the window and grabbed Will's hand. He silently kissed Will's knuckles with a relaxed smile. "Can I get you anything?" He asked with as much politeness and nonchalance as he would a stranger. "Drink?"

"I'm alright, thank you. I don't plan on staying for a long time." Will couldn't stop staring at Hannibal. It felt right to be so close to him again, like their minds were undergoing stress just by being apart. "How have things been since your release?"

"Isolated. Just because I have not been proven guilty does not mean I am proven innocent. I've been staying out of the public eye as much as possible."

"That's understandable. And I want you to know that I'm sorry." Will implanted guilt into his voice. Every moment, deception and acting became easier. It was so simple to put on a mask now. "I took what I saw in your mind at face value, and I didn't give you the most fair of treatment. I've been trying to make up for that. I want you to be innocent, Doctor, I really do. I'm searching for proof of it."

"I want to give you that proof. In any way you'll allow it. Here, come have a seat." He led them both to the couch, where they sat with their thighs touching. Hannibal lightly stroked Will's thigh with his fingertips.

"I know. The FBI wants proof too." Will slipped his arm around Hannibal's waist, trying not to nudge the wire. "They've brought up the LOOM again, but I'm not really sure about it. Have you experienced any side effects?"

"Nothing that's concerned me enough to take action. I've had some dreams with you in them, but they're not that eventful. I suppose a headache or two."

"I had a pretty vivid hallucination. It's made me worried about using it again."

"Well, then, I would never make you go through that if you're worried. Certainly they're not having you do it with Chilton?"

Will paused just long enough for it to be impactful. Like he was thinking about what and what not to tell him. Jack had said he could talk about Chilton — it was going to get out to the media at some point anyway. The FBI was surprised it hadn't already.

"Frederick Chilton died two days ago," he said.

Hannibal inhaled. "What happened to him?"

"He hung himself in his jail cell."

"Terrible." Hannibal smiled, which sent a chill down Will's spine. There were rare moments when Hannibal both frightened and intrigued him, and this was one of those. "Did he ever admit to anything?"

"No. And that's what makes this all so sloppy. Why they haven't let up on you yet. Because one of our only sources of information is now dead, and you're the only one left. You are the sole person that can tell them anything. So...I guess this is also a warning. I'm not sure. I only half know why I'm here."

"You wanted to apologize, but I see no need. You were doing what you had to do, taking the evidence and concocting theories from it. I don't blame you."

"I think my thoughts on the situation are just...very skewed. Considering I know you better than the rest of the FBI. The rest of the world."

"I don't regret letting you into my mind. You were a good houseguest."

Will smirked. "I'm glad you think so. You're a wonderfully intelligent man, Doctor. I mean it when I say I want you to be innocent." He glanced sideways at Hannibal. "But if you're not, I think that we're going to find out."

"If you give me dates, I will find alibis. If you give me evidence, I'll counteract it. You all have to give me the chance."

"And what if they want to use the LOOM?"

Hannibal looked Will in the eyes, raising a hand to stroke his cheek. "If they want it to happen, then I'll let them. But it doesn't have to be you on the other end, if you're worried about it."

"Well, as Crawford's been saying, it's just one more use." They pressed their foreheads together. "What could hurt?"

XXX - The Emergency

Chapter Notes

> Writing a fic this extensive over the course of many months means there's bound to be some inconsistencies and confusion, unfortunately :/ I realized that some of the details surrounding Will's body parts and the surgeries he's had were pretty confusing and may seem contradictory, so I've done a few small edits to the fic to hopefully help with that.
>
> Basically, Will has had a vagina-preserving phalloplasty. He still has a vaginal cavity, female G-spot, the ability to squirt and come from that area, etc. However he also has a penile implant that he can bend to make erect. It doesn't have the same sensations as a cis penis, but the clitoris was placed at the bottom of the phalloplasty to give good sensations at the base. Phalloplasties are great but can be a bit awkward at times, which is why Will is better off using a strap when it comes to anal.
>
> I hope this helps! If any post-phalloplasty men want to correct me, feel free.

May 4, 2030

"Thoughts?" Will asked as he slipped back into the van, coming face to face with Jack once more. He brushed off his shirt, then lifted it up to remove the wire tape. He ripped it off in one go, wincing at the sting on his skin.

"You got his permission; that's what's important." Jack was frowning as he looked down at the case file. He didn't say anything else, and Will impatiently leaned forward for more.

"And?"

"Will, you were way too lenient towards him. He's going to believe that we're buying into his bullshit."

"I made a manipulative move, Jack. Maybe you're getting along just fine with your hostility, but it's not working on him. You haven't made a dent!"

"You're not his friend, Will. If he thinks you are, he's going to use it against you. Manipulate you."

"Only if I let him. And I'm not gonna let him." Will took a deep breath. "You haven't trusted a word I've said over the past month, and if you're going to keep doing that, I'd prefer you just stop asking my opinion at all. I know what I'm doing. I've solved all kinds of cases. You've gotta trust me."

Jack glared at him, but Will could sense he knew he was right. Probably resented him for it, too.

"Since we have his permission, we're going to call him into the lab," Jack said, "and if we don't get the answers we need, we're going to take a much harsher approach."

"Got it. Do whatever you want, Jack. I'm not the one in charge." Will held up his hands. "I'm just trying to offer the advice that I think is the best. If you want to try and chip away at something indestructible, go ahead."

The only reason Will had the confidence to offer this up was because after they entered the lab, there would be no more chances to try. They were going to destroy everything. There would be no more Hannibal Lecter to arrest, no more Will Graham to indict for abetting a murderer. They would be gone for good, reborn into something new.

Will wasn't sure what that was yet, but he was excited to see.

———

When it came to Molly, Will was a coward.

He'd been struggling with what to do for hours. He wanted to be a man and sit down with her, tell her that things weren't going to work out anymore, but then she'd want to know why. It would come out of nowhere, and she'd start to suspect that something else was going on. She might say something to Jack before he and Hannibal could make their move.

He didn't want to hide from her, but he wondered if that was the best course of action. She didn't deserve to face what he and Hannibal has become. She didn't deserve their wrath. To turn and run from the problem would be the move of a lesser man, but it seemed like the only option. If he left in the night, told her he was going to work early and never came back, he wouldn't have to face the truth of what he was leaving behind. He wouldn't have to see in her face the way he'd failed her.

He lay in bed beside her that night wide awake, unable to even think about closing his eyes. He knew that sleep was integral on a night like this, but he wouldn't be able to as long as he had the source of his anxiety sleeping soundly beside him. He wanted Hannibal. He wanted to go home.

Even entering the palace wasn't helpful. Being apart seemed to make it harder to conjure now. It was still there, but small details were blurred, and the wonderful feeling that came with being inside their shared space wasn't as strong. They were forgetting important parts of each other, parts that they needed to come back together to remember. They were one shared mind, and the links were getting weaker with every moment they were physically separated. It made Will even more anxious.

Come to me.

It was the most vivid sound he'd ever heard echoing through the palace. It was right in his ear, like Hannibal was leaning down by the bed to kiss his temple and lure him back to where

he belonged. He was a siren calling out to Will, and Will was going to listen. He would listen even if it meant risking everything. Even if it meant hurting Molly.

We are losing each other. He felt a hand on his chest. *Come to me, my love. Come to me.*

Will carefully and quietly slipped out of bed, tiptoeing out of the room. He didn't see Molly stir, and he hoped that he'd been successful in not waking her. He grabbed clothes that he had still piled in the living room along with his shoes, not wanting to spend any extra time in the house at risk of waking her or Walter. He chose to leave out the back door, the farthest from their bedroom, and rather than opening the garage he merely snuck out the side door in the corner. He held the knobs of each door tightly, turning them to avoid the telltale *snick* of the latch before shutting them.

The night was dark and quiet. The stars were drowned out by the streetlights. He'd taken to parking on the street now, telling Molly that he didn't want to deal with the loud garage if he ever had to leave for work early. In reality, it was meant for moments like this. He turned on the car and quickly switched off the headlights, starting the drive that he had memorized by now. He drove in silence, left with only his thoughts— which, to be fair, were now the loudest part of him.

I'm sorry, Will. It's becoming too difficult to exist without you. I know it was risky to pull you away, but I couldn't stand the feeling of you slipping away.

"I can't, either." Will bit his bottom lip. "I can't be near her anymore. I don't feel like myself."

You aren't yourself. Not anymore. You've combined with me to create a new self.

"I'm going to have to go back tomorrow morning. I have to get my stuff. I have to get some sort of closure."

You cannot take things a step too far. If you say goodbye now, it will be too suspicious. You were too afraid to leave when you had the chance, and now the time has passed.

Will wanted to yell at him, to try and prove that he was less cowardly than that, but he knew it was true. He should have left Molly the second he started having feelings for Hannibal. He should have faced the truth and took off while it was still somewhat acceptable. Maybe if he'd done that earlier, they wouldn't have had to fight. Molly wouldn't be suffering in this loveless relationship anymore.

What you can do now is go to work tomorrow and finish what we've started. You just have to make it through tonight. I hope I can make that easier.

"I'll actually be able to sleep when I'm with you."

I have no intention of letting you sleep. Not yet.

Will opened his mouth to ask what that meant, but then he felt it. The undeniable sensation of lust building up in his groin, the sudden urge to be as close to Hannibal as he possibly could. Heat spread through his cheeks.

"You're making me come over here and risk everything because you're horny, is that it?"

No. This is just a side effect of knowing that we're near the end. He could hear the smirk in Hannibal's voice, caught a clear vision of him inside of their shared mind. *Can you imagine how beautiful it's all going to be?*

Will shifted in his seat. "I'll be there soon." He set an alarm on his phone for the next morning, already assuming that he'd be too exhausted to remember later. He had to be on time tomorrow.

It wasn't long after he got to the house that he was shoving Hannibal against the wall, pressing their lips together and thrusting his hips against Hannibal's. They quickly migrated to the bedroom, collapsing onto the bed and stripping their clothes until they lay bare on top of each other, with Will nipping Hannibal's neck. Hannibal grunted.

"What's making you so excited about it all?" Hannibal said into his ear. "I wonder if we have different ideas."

Will was a child again. He felt his victim's teeth scrape his knuckles, blood on his upper lip, snarling as his fist pummeled another human being with such force, such childlike unawareness of his own strength. He could picture the fear on the other boys' faces as they were struck with the reality that someone like him -- someone weak, a *girl* -- could hit so hard.

He'd never been a girl. He'd never been anything but himself. From birth, a dull flame crackled deep inside of his chest, and his whole life he'd been holding his breath to prevent it from growing out of control. Hannibal Lecter had pinned him down and shoved oxygen down his throat, into his lungs, until that fire consumed him. He was now a creature of vengeance and flame.

"We are going to be so *fucking* powerful," Will hissed. He could feel himself becoming wetter by the second.

"We already are." Hannibal smiled. "Show me how powerful you are."

"Do you care about these sheets?"

"We'll never be in this house again after tomorrow."

Will's hands traveled down Hannibal's thighs. He wrapped one hand around Hannibal's cock, which was now hard, and began to stroke. Hannibal thrust his hips, keening, and Will felt a burst of pleasure of his own. It was an invisible hand slowly stroking his clit -- a much weaker sensation than Hannibal felt, and purely psychological, but there all the same.

"You're not going to do anything until I decide you can." Will stopped, his hand stationary, and he could see in Hannibal's eyes how desperate he was. "I've got control of more than you realize."

He was bluffing. He was basing his assumptions off of what happened in the car; if they both felt lust at the same time, if they both felt pleasure in almost the same ways, then neither of them were going to come unless the other did. Will was going to play with that in the best possible ways, if he could.

"You're not going to come until I do," Will said. "I'll play with you all I want, but you won't come."

"Everything is in the drawer," Hannibal said. "Anything you want."

Will took a wand from the drawer, first running it along Hannibal's cock without any power. Hannibal was already squirming from that, so Will couldn't imagine how he was about to feel.

He turned it on the lowest setting. Hannibal cried out in pleasure, and Will tried his best to hold back. They were both writhing in pleasure, and Will wasn't even being touched. It was going to make edging him so much easier.

"Hannibal," he said, "everything you're feeling right now? I feel it, too. Nothing is even touching me, and I feel it."

"Oh, fuck." Hannibal clearly loved the thought of that. He threw his head back, eyes closing.

"It makes it much easier to tease you." Will could feel it building up inside of him, begging to be released. That's when he took the wand away. Hannibal groaned. "You're not doing anything until I say, Hannibal."

"We were interrupted last time," Hannibal panted. "If something happens again, just keep going. I want to fuck you, Will."

"You can fuck me if you keep behaving yourself." Will pressed the wand to Hannibal again, this time on a higher setting. Hannibal bucked and moaned, and Will smiled mischievously down at him. "If you come, I'm ending things now."

"No." Hannibal shook his head. "Don't."

"Then prove to me you can behave."

Higher. Hannibal cursed, his body tensing, but he didn't come. Will knew it was taking a lot of power to hold back. It made him sweat, made him horny.

Will took the wand away again. "I think it's my turn. I'm going to do whatever I want, but you can't touch at all. You're going to sit there, hands over your head. Don't touch. Just watch. See what happens."

Will didn't even try to build himself up. He was so horny, so ready, that he touched himself with the wand at the highest setting. It made his entire body contract, and he moaned. Ecstasy spread through his whole body, making him smile in mindless pleasure, and the buildup quickly became too much. He heard Hannibal moaning beside him, as well, thrusting like the toy was touching him too. His cock was still hard, jerking as if someone was touching it.

They both came at the exact same moment. Hannibal finished without any manipulation at all; it was completely hands-free. Will's was more dramatic. He squirted, parts of it landing on Hannibal and parts getting on the sheets. Hannibal smiled, clearly enjoying it.

"You never told me you get that excited," Hannibal said, voice hoarse.

"I asked if you liked these sheets."

"Come here." Hannibal placed his hands on Will's hips, guiding him towards his still-hard cock. "Ride me."

Will stretched out his vagina with a few fingers before lowering onto Hannibal. His cock slid right in, and both of them hummed in pleasure as Will kept moving down. Eventually, it stopped at his G-spot, which felt spectacular.

"Ride," Hannibal told him.

"Patience." Will stayed still for just a moment longer to taunt him. Then, he started off slow. It was torture for both of them — they just wanted more, faster — but the buildup would be worth it.

Their thighs and hips tensed, pressing against each other, and Will went faster. They both broke out into a sweat, lost in their own world, and Will couldn't go fast enough.

Hannibal lifted Will off of him and straddled him instead, fucking him harder and faster. He then quickly reached for the wand, and before Will could stop him he was pressing it to Will's clit while he thrust in and out. It was a feeling so intense that he nearly screamed; Hannibal's cock was continuously hitting the perfect spot, and the vibrations on his clit were almost too much to handle. He was stuffed full, yet Hannibal was still the one that was putty under his hands.

"Yeah, fuck. Oh, holy *shit*." Will couldn't keep his composure anymore. The wand hit just the right spot, and Hannibal thrust so hard that both of their bodies were rocking. Will's jaw dropped, his eyes fluttering, and his entire body tensed and went still. All thoughts left his head, replaced with Hannibal's grunts and the beautiful pleasure spreading everywhere, everywhere, making his legs shake and his heart palpitate—

Hannibal removed himself, and Will came. He body jerked, and he let out a cry of pure bliss as thick cum spilled out of him. "Fuck," he gasped, "fuck, *oh...fuck*."

They both breathed heavily and in sync, Hannibal hovering over him. When Hannibal finally got off of him and sank down beside him, Will laid his head on his chest. Their hearts were beating completely in time with one another.

They were silent for so long that Will thought Hannibal had fallen asleep. It surprised him when the other man spoke. "I love you."

"I love you," Will said. "You said that we have different ideas of what makes us excited. What did you mean?"

"You're excited when thinking about the power that we'll hold. I'm excited when thinking about becoming one with you." Hannibal rubbed Will's arm. "But I also think our plans are different. Our emergency plans, to be exact."

Will's own heart skipped a beat. "What do you mean by that?"

"I told you that I am willing to die for this. For you, for us. If it means that I no longer have a body, that I must spend the rest of our time living in your mind only, then I am okay with that. I would prefer we keep it that way."

"You're not going to die."

"Maybe neither of us will. That's the ideal situation. But if it comes down to only one of us, you have more to lose. I would prefer being the one to die, Will."

"You don't have any more to lose than I do. We've both lost everything but each other."

"If things go awry, I would prefer you cover your tracks. Let me die, and act like things are back to normal. Do not throw yourself into the line of fire. I don't think I could handle it."

"I couldn't handle seeing you die, either."

"Will. I need you to realize that our situations aren't the same." Hannibal looked down at him, and his gaze was stern. "We both met at the same time, but I spent five years with you living in my head. You didn't remember me until a few weeks ago."

"You're saying you've had it worse than me?"

"I've spent all this time yearning for you. Pining for you, watching my image of you in my head slowly contort as I forgot the fine details of your face. Wondering if I would ever see you again. Meanwhile, you went about the rest of your life without even a thought of me."

"I thought you'd forgiven me for that. It wasn't entirely my fault; it was a brash decision--"

"I have forgiven you. I'm not angry with you, I'm not trying to blame you." Hannibal sighed. "What I'm trying to say is that watching you die would be horrific for me. It would be watching the man I've loved for nearly six years disappear. I'd be put back in that place, that isolation. It may be easier for you."

Will swallowed. He was right. As much as he hated to admit it.

"I know what you've been thinking," Hannibal said. "I'm in your head, after all. You are preparing to sacrifice yourself should the time come. But I don't want that. I would rather have both of us die than have you be the only one to die."

"So, what are you trying to say? Should we prepare for both of us?"

"Prepare for me, and prepare for both of us. If I die, you still have a chance to live a normal life. To be outside of prison, to 'recover' in the eyes of the FBI from the damage I've done to you. I have no chance of that."

"Do you realize how much that's going to hurt me?"

"I do. What you choose to do with your life afterwards is up to you. But what I need you to know is that if you die, there's a chance that I'm going to follow right after. I've had enough time without you there physically, I've had enough time pining for you; I don't want any more."

"I don't want either of us to die. I want us both to make it."

"We can hope for the best. But we should prepare for the worst." Hannibal wrapped his arms around him, kissing the top of his head. "I love you, Will."

"I love you." Will closed his eyes. "Tell me about the things we'll do when we inevitably make it out together. What's your plan?"

Hannibal lulled him to sleep with stories of a cabin in the woods. Fishing and hunting and forestry for miles, just the way Will liked it.

Will.

Will awoke to the sound of Hannibal's voice echoing through his mind. He rolled over, groggily checking the clock to see that it was only three in the morning; it was much too early to be getting up. He needed rest.

The bed was empty next to him, though. The sheets where Hannibal had slept were disturbed, tossed aside, but he wasn't there. He felt an odd sense of dread.

"Hello?" He whispered.

Will. I need you to come into the den, please. Calmly.

"What's going on?"

We have a bit of a problem. Put some clothes on first, though.

Will got out of bed and threw the T-shirt he'd worn at home back on, along with his boxers. Cautiously, he eased out into the hallway and down to where the den was. It was more centered than the living room, free of any windows, and the moment he entered the room Will knew why.

Hannibal was kneeling by the fireplace, tending to a lump on the floor. A gasp escaped Will's throat, and he rushed forward.

Molly was crumpled on the ground, her hands tied behind her back with zip ties and rope wrapped around her whole body. A bundle of washcloths sat in her mouth as a gag, and her eyes were closed. Hannibal glanced up at Will, strangely calm.

"She'll be alright," he said, "but she's going to wake up soon. You'll have to help me out."

XXXI- The Problem

May 5, 2030

"Hannibal, what the fuck?" Will wrapped his arms around Molly, stroking back her hair to make sure she was okay. She was breathing, and her pulse was strong; she was just out cold. Will propped her up against the bricks of the fireplace. His heart was racing. "What happened?"

"You were asleep. I heard someone knocking on the door, and I got up to see who it was. It was her." Hannibal's face was impassive. "She got up in my face, started accusing me of doing something to you. She called me a murderer, a psychopath, said I was manipulating you."

"Fuck. Hannibal, you might have just really fucked us over." He stood, moving close to Hannibal and speaking in a low hiss.

"She will be fine. It wasn't that rough."

"No, you've completely fucked up any chance of us seeming innocent. We could have explained this away, maybe, but not anymore. She's totally going to know that we're guilty of something."

"Will, you didn't hear the way she was speaking to me. She threatened to call the police."

Will exhaled. They definitely couldn't have that, but this wasn't any better. They couldn't just let her go, not after all of this. She was going to wake up and find out the entire truth, and the minute she broke free she was going to run to the FBI. What reason did they have to not believe her? After all the suspicions placed towards Hannibal?

"We can bribe her. Tempt her with freedom and safety as long as she stays quiet for a short amount of time. At this point, it's not even twelve hours. Small price to pay for the safety of

you and your child."

"Don't bring Walter into this. He's a fucking kid." Will bared his teeth. "Hannibal, I refuse to let you hurt my wife or her kid. If you even think about touching her--"

"You'll have to save that sentiment for later," Hannibal said calmly, nodding towards the fireplace. "I'll let you handle this, then. But don't let her out."

She was stirring, her eyelids fluttering as she began to wake. Will grit his teeth, letting out a loud sigh. "Oh, Molly," he said, kneeling right in front of her. "Why did you have to come over here? Fuck."

It took a minute for her to finally open her eyes and get a sense of her surroundings. Once she did, she gasped at the sight of Will's face and the realization of what was happening. She tried to scramble away, but her restraints made it difficult. Will reached for her, placing a hand on her shoulder.

"Hey, Molly. Hey, hey. It's alright." Will removed the gag from her mouth.

"What the fuck. What the fuck is wrong with you?!" She shouted, looking past him to see Hannibal standing over them both. "Is this where you've been this whole time? Where your head's been?"

"Molly, how did you know I was here? What made you come over here?"

She looked seconds away from spitting in his face. "I put a tracker in your car. I was sick of you running away on me without telling me where you were going."

"When? Where is it?" Hannibal leaned forward, and Will could sense the panic rushing through him. He tried his best to hide it, but Will knew everything now.

"Fuck you."

"Molly," Will said, "where is it? When did you put it in?"

She frowned, betrayal flickering in her expression as she realized that the two were on the same side. "It...it was only a few days ago. Like, this week. It's under the front passenger seat."

"Does anyone else have access to the location?"

"I don't think so. I mean, it's just an Airtag, on my phone--"

"Does anyone know you're here?"

"I told Jack," she said, but Will caught the lie almost instantly. He'd learned to pick up on when she was lying; she had a specific tell. She would always hold an intense gaze, and her lower lip would subtly dart between her teeth and back out again. It was like she wanted to bite it, but she was stopping herself. Since he knew this, Hannibal now knew it, too. He shook his head at her.

"That's not the truth," he said, "is it?"

"Tell the truth, Molly. Please."

"...No. I didn't tell anyone. I told Walter that I had to run somewhere. That you needed me to bring you something at a crime scene, and that I didn't want him to come because it would be scary." She began to tear up at the thought of her son. "Please, don't hurt me. My son needs me. He's already lost his dad."

"We don't want to hurt you, hon. Promise." It was halfway a lie; he knew Hannibal would do anything to protect their plan. This, though, was where Will was going to have to draw the

line.

Molly shook her head, a humorless smile creeping across her face. "You two," she said in disbelief, "have something going on. You've changed my husband into someone else."

"He's always been this way," Hannibal replied. "It just took a little push for him to realize it."

"Hannibal." Will could sense that a fight was going to start brewing between the two if he didn't do something. "Go remove the tracker, please. My keys are on the kitchen counter. Destroy it. Molly, hon, do you have your phone?"

"Don't fucking call me that. You and I are done," Molly spat.

"Okay. Do you have your phone?"

"I do." Hannibal tapped him on the shoulder with it. Will took it, putting in the passcode that she'd had for the entire time he'd known her, and deleted the tag from her map. Hannibal put his hand on Will's shoulder as he watched him do it, and Will knew he was relishing in the display. He wanted to be physical with Will just so Molly would see it, just so she would realize how tight his hold on Will really was. It was so petty.

"There. Go get the tracker, please."

Hannibal hesitated, looking Will in the eyes. You and I are working on the same side, yes? He thought. I can trust you?

Will nodded. Don't doubt me. Not after all of this.

Hannibal softened, kissing him on the cheek before standing up and leaving the den without a word. Molly watched him go, hatred burning in her eyes.

"Quick, let me out," she said once the front door shut. "We don't have a ton of time." She struggled against her restraints, turning around to offer her bound hands to Will.

Will stood there, conflicted. He knew that the moral thing to do would be to let her out, to give her some comfort, but it would risk everything he'd been building up to. It would risk the happy life he was finally going to have.

"Molly," he said softly, shaking his head. "I can't."

"What? What the hell, Will? Let me out. Now."

"I can't," he said again. "Molly, I love you, but I can't."

"Will. Please, God, please." She was panicking now. She was witnessing the man she married turn into someone completely different. "What are you doing?"

"Things are different now. I love you so much, but Hannibal..." He trailed off. There was no good way to explain it. There was nothing that could make the rest of the world see how beautiful their relationship was. The magnificence in continuously feeling his presence inside his head, even when he was out of the room. Sharing thoughts, sharing feelings, sharing everything.

"What. Hannibal what?" Molly shouted. "You're going to let him kill me?! Is he worth more than your fucking wife, Will?"

"I know. I'm sorry, Molly. There really is no excuse. I'm not going to try to excuse myself." He gazed down at the floor, too cowardly to meet her gaze. "There's nothing I can say that's going to make this better. I'm so sorry."

"You can make it better by keeping me the fuck alive, Will. For my son."

"I promise, I'm going to keep you alive. I want you to stay alive. I won't let Hannibal hurt you."

"What the hell is going on between you two? What has he done to you? Was this the LOOM?"

"It was the LOOM. But we have a much longer history than that. You know how I never really specified what happened in Italy?"

Molly shuddered. "Fuck. You've known him all this time, and you're just now telling me? You didn't tell Jack?"

"I didn't remember him until now. Some fucked up things happened to my mind, Mol. I forgot a huge chunk of my life, and I only just now remembered it. And he was there."

"Are you sure? Are you sure he's not just manipulating you?"

"I've seen the memories. I've experienced them. They're vivid, right ahead of me. I can nearly brush against my past self with my fingertips." He finally looked up at her. "I can see what he sees. He changed me into someone different, and then I forgot all about him. Now that I'm back, seeing these memories again, I'm changing back into that person he makes me."

"What person is that?"

Will took a breath. "Will Graham."

The front door shut. Molly deflated, realizing that her window of opportunity was over. Her own husband wasn't on her side anymore. She was alone, and she had no one she could trust.

"It's going to be okay," Will said to her. "I promise."

When Hannibal reentered the room, he stood at Will's side. A bodyguard, an all-seeing eye, a protector and a threat. "What do you think we should do, Will?"

Will looked down at his wife, who was now silently crying. Hannibal didn't feel any sympathy for her; Will could sense it. Will's sympathy was going to have to be strong enough for both of them.

"Molly. Hannibal and I won't be in the state come tomorrow afternoon," he said. "You can tell Jack anything. Anything at all that you could want to tell him. You could write fucking novels about how much you hate me, for all I care. Get money off of it. But I need you to stay quiet, for not even twelve more hours."

"You want me to just stay quiet? When you've knocked me out and tied me up because you're going to run away with a fucking murderer?"

"Yes," Hannibal said sternly. Molly glanced over at him, but her gaze didn't linger. She was afraid of him. She was becoming afraid of both of them. "We don't just want you to. We need you to."

"Oh, great. That changes everything. Now let me go."

"Not with that attitude, I won't." Hannibal smirked at her. "Molly, do you care about your son?"

Molly blanched. "Don't. Don't do anything to my son!"

"Hannibal." Will held up his hand. "Stop that."

"Walter, right? Eleven or so? It's been you and him against the world for a long time, hasn't it? Ever since your first husband unfortunately left this world."

"Hannibal."

"God, fuck, just leave me alone," Molly whimpered. "Stop."

"He likes baseball, animals, video games. Just like any other boy his age. He's already lost one parent. It would be a terrible tragedy for him to lose another."

"Hannibal. Fuck off." Will shoved him, his hands colliding with Hannibal's muscled abdomen. He was sturdy, strong. He didn't budge when Will tried to move him; he merely looked over at Will as if he was amused at his attempt. "There's no need for any of this."

"How does he know all of this, Will? How the hell does he know anything about Walter?"

"Will has been inside my head for weeks. I know anything he knows."

Molly closed her eyes. "Please. I won't say anything. Please."

"Molly. I need to know that I can trust you," Will said gently, kneeling back down to stroke her arm. She jerked away from him. "This is serious. You need to stay quiet, just for a little while longer."

"They'll know I was keeping things from them."

"Not necessarily. It's nearly four in the morning, Molly. You can tell them you were asleep. I'm sure Walter's already forgotten about what you told him. All you need to do is say that you saw me leave the house at 8:30 AM today, and that was the last time you saw me."

"What are you going to do?"

"We aren't going to do anything. We're just going to run. He and I are going to go somewhere new, somewhere that no one can suspect Hannibal of anything anymore."

"Have you killed anyone?"

Will hesitated, and that was enough for Molly. She groaned.

"I haven't killed anyone since I met you," he said to her. "It was all while I was in Italy."

"Have you really been coming to see him this whole time? Is that what this is? You've been hallucinating him, you've been imagining him in bed with you, leaving the house in the ungodly hours of the morning just to come over here and...I don't know. Fuck him? Lament?"

"I've been coming over here, yes."

"We do both of those things," Hannibal said wryly. "You interrupted one of those tonight. I'll spare you the details of which one."

"So kind." Molly's jaw set, her lip quivering. "I know you're threatening my son. You want me to keep quiet, or you'll kill my son."

"Hannibal."

"Over here. With me. Now." Hannibal grabbed Will's upper arm, ushering him towards the back of the room. They stood in the corner, far away from the fireplace, and Hannibal leaned close to Will's face.

"Palace," he whispered. Reluctantly, Will closed his eyes and envisioned grass swaying in the wind, water rushing past his legs, and Hannibal standing at the bed of the creek. Will waded toward him, taking his hand.

"You know more about me than any other person on this Earth, Will." Hannibal's voice was cold. "Do you really still not know what I'm capable of?"

A chill ran down Will's spine, and a cacophony of noise and visions suddenly rang through his head. Screams, wails, the sizzling of meat cooking on the stove and the cracking of bones as a strong pair of hands dug into a rib cage. Opening the chest, fingers wrapped around a still-beating heart as vengeance rose through his soul, thinking, I have not had a heart in years. Metallic-tasting blood in his mouth, piercing his claws into another's skin, digging the dried blood out from under his fingernails later on and watching the flakes tumble to the floor. Pricking his own finger with the blade and letting the blood touch his tongue, hoping for even a fraction of the potential taste of his missing lover. Growling, nearly smashing his fist into the mirror when he realized that he may never have a single glimpse of the man he loved ever again.

He saw himself through Hannibal's eyes. He was seeing Will Graham for the first time in five years, and it took all of the strength in his body to not fall to his knees in relief. It took every iota of mental effort to not run to him.

Will understood. He felt Hannibal's conviction, his desperation. This anger, this bitterness, it all came from fear and loneliness, the horrific fear of being left without his other half again.

"I know what you're capable of," Will said after a long pause. "And I know you refuse to do anything to risk us being apart. I understand, Hannibal." He took a step closer. "But I swear to God, if you hurt Molly or Walter, I'm leaving. You won't have me anymore. I know you know what it's like to lose your family, so don't act like you don't."

Hannibal blinked. Will knew that was a low blow, especially since he didn't know the entire story of what happened to his sister. But it was the only tactic he had in his mind that was going to work. It was the only thing that would reach him at this point.

"Don't talk about Mischa," he said.

"Hannibal—"

"Don't."

They stared at each other. Hannibal was slowly starting to break.

"...Do you treasure them more than I?" He asked softly. "If you do, I understand. But I want to know."

"You have your answer already, Hannibal. If I treasured them more than you, then I would not be running away with you. I would not be preparing to throw this entire life away to start a new one with you." Will squeezed his hand. "I need you. You know I need you. But I won't let you murder this woman. Let alone her-- her young child. Do you really want to take a child's life?"

Hannibal exhaled, trembling as some unseen memory flooded him. "No. No, I don't. I'm simply desperate. If it makes you more comfortable, then I will not harm them. But you did not say anything about bluffing."

"You want to scare her?"

"She needs an incentive to keep quiet, Will. As of right now, if you won't let me hurt her or anyone she cares about, we have nothing."

"In that case, I'll let you bluff."

"Good. Because she's halfway through her restraints, at this point."

"Wait, what?" Will furrowed his brow, and the quiet rush of the creek vanished. He was back in the den, watching as Hannibal made his way back over to the fireplace. Sure enough, Molly had found some way to loosen the ropes while they were in their own little world, and she groaned in frustration when Hannibal tightened them back in place.

"You will get to go home as soon as you cooperate with me, Molly," Hannibal said to her. She didn't respond, just scowled.

"Mol. Listen to him." Will stepped forward. "For Walter's sake, listen to him."

Molly's eyes shone with tears, but she nodded.

"If I let you go, you are going to drive straight home and stay with your son. Today is Sunday; you don't have work, he doesn't have to go to school. Stay with your son like you would any other morning. Do not contact the FBI. Do not contact the local police. Do not contact any type of law enforcement. I swear to you, Molly Graham, I will know if you do."

"We both will," Will said. "No matter where you are, we'll know."

"You cannot have any sort of contact with law enforcement until after they call you in the afternoon. They will contact you first. Let them be the ones to initiate. They will tell you things about us, but do not tell them the truth. Not yet. You won't tell them a word of the truth until four o'clock in the afternoon today, understand? They'll understand the hesitation if you tell them you were threatened, shed a few tears."

"After that time frame, you can tell them anything you want. Anything." Will leaned down. "And we'll be gone, and you don't have to worry about us anymore."

"If we hear a single clue that you've told law enforcement about us earlier than that time, we will know. I will call my contacts, and I will kill your son."

Molly whimpered.

"He will die. And you will die. And it won't be quick, either. Twelve hours of your silence is a very, very small price to pay for your life and your son's, isn't it?"

"I won't say anything," Molly caved. "I promise, I won't say anything."

"We are listening. We know what you're up to. Do not cross us." Hannibal placed his hand over the ropes on Molly's back. "Any questions?"

Molly turned to look at Will, tearful eyes blazing with betrayal and hatred. "Did you ever love me?"

Will blinked, stunned. He held back tears of his own, looking her in those powerful eyes for the last time and nodding wordlessly. It was all he could bring himself to do.

Hannibal reached into his pocket and pulled out a large knife. Molly cried out in fear, but all Hannibal did with it was slash the ropes and cut the zip ties off of her wrists. He kept a tight grip on one of her wrists, leading her out into the kitchen and towards the back door.

"No shouting for neighbors. No visiting anyone. Go home. I would hate for your son to be alone at home." The two men walked her down the back steps and to her car. When she sagged down into the driver's seat, relieved, she gave them one final glare before closing the door in their faces. She was clearly considering running them over, but she let that urge pass and drove away.

They watched her car disappear down the road and into the night. Hannibal sighed.

"I think we're awake for the day, unfortunately," he said. "Don't you?"

XXXII- The Blade

May 5, 2030

It was the day of reckoning. Neither Hannibal nor Will had been able to get more sleep, so they spent the rest of the night drinking coffee and finalizing their plans. They had to make sure everything was perfect, every minute detail covered.

They watched the sun rise from the kitchen window. When the sky was a brilliant orange and Hannibal's face was illuminated by golden light, Will took his hand and kissed his knuckles.

The first phone call came a little before nine that morning. Will stared at his phone screen, dread setting in at the sight of Jack's name.

"This is either run-of-the-mill, or we're fucked," he said, placing the phone on the table. "Stay quiet."

He answered the call, putting Jack on speaker. "Hey. You need me to come in?"

"We're gonna call Hannibal Lecter in about an hour." There wasn't anything different in Jack's voice. No suspicion, no wariness. Will took that as a good sign. "We'll ask him to come in as soon as possible. We don't know for sure when or if he'll agree to come, but it'd be good to have you here anyway."

"I can be there in, like, forty-five minutes."

"Sounds good. You sleep okay? Good enough mental state to use the LOOM?"

"Would you stop me if I wasn't?"

Jack paused. "Is that a no?"

Will caught a smirk on Hannibal's face. "I'll be fine, Jack. See you soon."

Will hung up the call. The silence in the kitchen was now much heavier.

"I think we're in the clear," he said after a moment. "Do you?"

"As of right now."

"We're gonna be okay, right?" Will asked. "We're ready for this?"

"It's going to be beautiful, Will." Hannibal gazed at him tenderly. "So beautiful."

Will stood. "I guess I should go."

Hannibal followed suit, hugging Will tightly. Will sank into it, returning the embrace, and he couldn't stop his heart from beating faster.

"I love you," Hannibal said. "I'll see you soon."

Will gripped his keys tightly, kissing Hannibal on the cheek before walking out the front door for what would be the last time.

———

Small details were always more interesting when you know you would never be seeing them again. Will paced through the halls of the FBI laboratories with this thought in mind, taking note of every slight imperfection that he'd never really noticed before. A scratch in that glass window, the worn-down letters on the office plaques, the odd stain on the carpet that no one could identify. They'd become such common symbols in his life, and now he would be leaving them behind forever.

Someone else may take his place — or maybe not. Maybe what he was about to do would change the trajectory of this technology. Maybe they'd never use the LOOM again. He honestly hoped for that; he wanted to be the only one of his kind. No one else deserves to go through the pain nor the beauty that this connection brought.

As soon as he entered Jack's office, they called Hannibal to let him know that the FBI wanted to ask him a few more questions. They wanted to use the machine once more, just to tie up loose ends, and then if Hannibal was innocent, there would be no reason to bother him ever again. Hannibal, of course, took the news in stride, cordially agreeing to come in.

Will and Jack had about an hour to put their heads together. Jack shot ideas off of Will, who focused more on appearances than effective planning. He had to seem nervous, like he didn't want to use the LOOM again. He was the one with the broken brain, the one who knew how dangerous this device really could be. It wasn't a hard acting job; his nerves were mostly real. They were just there for different reasons.

Jack quizzed Will on dates, making sure that he had each murder memorized. He had to search through Hannibal's brain for alibis on those nights in particular, since they wouldn't have all the time in the world. He had to test Hannibal's claims of innocence, rifle through his thoughts and see if there was something he was hiding. He quizzed Will on names, locations, times, even the weather on the day of each murder; every detail mattered. They could make or break a true memory -- if it had been a warm day, and Hannibal remembered it to be cold, that memory could be completely false. It could be something he'd crafted to hide his true actions.

Will passed each test with flying colors, despite not needing to. He had no intention of actually searching for these things. He could practically feel Hannibal's footsteps pacing through his own mind, his head pulsing with pain with each one. They were both tense, stressed, and trying to remember the answers to Jack's questions wasn't helping.

"Okay," Jack finally said, closing the folder in front of him. "I think we're ready to go. Shouldn't be much longer now. He doesn't seem like the type to be late."

They migrated to the lab, and Will ran through the necessary tests. Blood pressure, heartbeat, reflexes. He focused on the feeling of his own heart pounding through his arm as the cuff got

tighter, wondering how much longer it would be beating.

He wasn't necessarily expecting to die, but he had to keep it in mind as a possibility. No one knew what the two of them were about to go through, least of all each other. They could lash out, genocide thrumming through their veins as their combined brain grew stronger. They could be shot, they could have heart attacks, strokes, go into comas. Anything was possible. Never before had one human brain completely combined with another, and the body wasn't made for something like that.

Jack came back with Hannibal in tow, and Will shared a glance with him. He was glad that no one was measuring his heart rate at that moment.

"Okay," Jack told them both as Hannibal took a seat next to Will. Hannibal leaned forward in his chair and offered a hand to Will, who shook it. They both kept straight faces, but it didn't escape Will how tense Hannibal's jaw was. "Nothing special today, you two. We're going to offer you stimuli once you're under, and we should be able to monitor your memories of each time, Doctor Lecter. You know the drill, right?"

"Yes," Hannibal nodded. "I do."

"Good. This should be the last time we need you here. We'll be here to watch you and make sure nothing happens to you both."

They were both given a few sips of water before they were strapped down to their chairs. The restraints were the only thing hiding Will's trembling hands.

I love you, Hannibal thought. *It's going to be okay*.

Will swallowed. *I know*.

The nurse plunged a needle into Will's arm, and he leaned his head back and closed his eyes.

He didn't materialize in the creek as usual. Instead, he was standing inside the vast palace, basking in colored streams of light from the stained glass windows. When he turned his head, Hannibal was there, a soft smile on his face.

"This is uneventful," Will said.

"We have to wait for them to flip the switch, remember? The sedatives have to kick in. They haven't-- ah, never mind. There's the needle." He took a deep breath. "It may take a moment."

"What do we have to do?"

"I don't know any more than you do. But...there's a place I would like to return to. I think it would be a good place to be once this all starts." He offered Will his hand. "Come along."

Will followed him. He always would. He had a feeling he knew where they were going.

"Nothing has ever been more important than this moment," Hannibal said, leading him to the door at the end of the hall. The door made of steel, the one locking the most vicious memory

inside of it. "Nothing was ever the same for us after that night in my kitchen. We parted, abandoned each other in different ways, and we wouldn't come back together until years later."

"You want to go back to the moment we betrayed each other?"

"I believe we can change it," Hannibal replied, his face set with determination. "I believe that you and I are powerful enough to change this memory for the better."

They both placed their hands on the knob, pulling at the door with all of their strength. Will felt an impending wave of relaxation, the sedatives beginning to kick in, but he resisted the urge to lie down. He had to be as awake as possible for this.

The door creaked open, revealing the dimly-lit kitchen. Two men knelt by the fridge, soaked in blood, sweat, and anguished tears. Will hardly recognized them anymore, but he knew that this was the most important part of them. This was special. This was a moment that defined their relationship.

They walked hand in hand towards the men on the floor. The men didn't register their presence, as their realities were separate, but soon they wouldn't be. Soon, everything was going to come together.

"Imagine being me," Hannibal told him, "and I'll imagine being you. That way, we'll be assuming two points of view at once. When they flip the switch, then those points of view will all converge."

"Looks painful," Will said, nodding towards the version of himself that was bleeding out on the floor. A massive, gaping wound covered his lower torso. "You ready to handle that?"

"It can't be any worse than what I was going through," Hannibal said. "I was gutted emotionally. I bled just as heavily. And I had to walk away from you."

Will grit his teeth. He crept up to the Hannibal from the past, kneeling down to place his hand on the man's blood-covered shoulder. He took Hannibal's chin in his hands, feeling his warm tears of betrayal on his fingers, and looked him in the eyes.

In a blink, he became that man. He became the betrayed man, the man with the bloody shoulder. He became the one with the knife in his hands, staring into nothingness as his present body disappeared. There was no present Hannibal, no present Will. For now, it was just the past, just this memory, but they were facing it with a new perspective.

He turned to look at himself. Will Graham, gasping for air, holding his abdomen in a fruitless attempt to keep the blood inside of him. Will Graham, trying to do what was right and abandoning himself in the process. Abandoning the man he loved. Will Graham, so desperate to love yet so unwilling to be loved.

His body looked back at him. Hannibal Lecter, holding a knife tighter than he ever had. Hannibal Lecter, trying with all his might to not burst into tears. Hannibal Lecter, so desperate to be loved yet so unwilling to be seen.

He felt the air in the room change. They didn't have much time to register what was about to happen before someone flipped the switch.

They both jolted, the floor rocking underneath them. They swayed, and Will fell over onto himself. They held each other, each inhabiting the other's body, and Will suddenly knew what he had to do. He knew with more certainty than he had ever known anything.

He flipped the knife around in his hands and brought it towards himself.

The blade pierced his stomach, and even though he was in Hannibal's body he could still feel everything. He felt every second of the sharp edges slicing soft tissue, each layer of skin splitting and beginning to bleed. He relished in the feeling. The pain was cathartic.

Hannibal, wearing Will's skin, gasped and reached for him. Will shook his head, throwing the knife to the side and caressing the other man's face. The blood from his fingers was now stamped onto his partner's cheeks. He didn't know what to call himself anymore. He didn't know what to call the other man anymore. He just knew they were partners.

"I wield the knife," he said with Hannibal's voice, "and I take the blade."

"I am the attacker," Hannibal said with Will's voice, "and I am the victim."

"I betray. I am betrayed. I love, and I am loved. I see, and I am seen," they spoke at once.

Their hands snaked towards each other's wounds, and they began to dig their fingers in. Will felt his lover's fingers squirming deep inside of him, and he mimicked the movement. They were both looking for the same thing. Deeper, deeper, up to their wrists in each other's organs. Up to the forearm. The elbow.

Hannibal Lecter's fingers climbed up the ladder of Will Graham's ribs. Will Graham's nails dug into Hannibal Lecter's lungs, threatening to pop them. They both screamed, crying out in agony and ecstasy, but with every centimeter closer to their goal the adrenaline ran stronger. They could feel it thrumming through them, and their ears rang with each other's cries as well as the pain.

Their hands seized upon each other's hearts, gripping them tightly in triumph. They beat in their palms, each pulse resonating through their fingers. They both shared a long look in the eyes before beginning to pull downwards.

The pain vanished. Will felt nothing anymore. All he knew was that the farther down his heart was pulled, the more his heartstrings stretched taut, the more he began to remember. Every second was another memory flooding back to him. Another scene in the endless tape of their lives together.

The life that the Proto-MED had taken from him was now returning. He was breaking through the massive gap of lost time. Months of experience flashed before his eyes in seconds, his brain ticking through each of them like a rapid slideshow. It wasn't like the first time he remembered; it wasn't fleeting anymore. The memories came to him and they stuck

with him. They were as vivid as if the past five years had never happened, as if those events had occurred seconds before.

His head began to pound. He let out a guttural cry of relief, of regret, yearning for all the time that they had lost, agonizing over the fact that they could never live freely and safely. It ended once they both yanked their hearts from each other's bodies, letting them out into the light. Blood spilled onto the floor, and they both collapsed with relief and exhaustion.

Holding each other's hearts in hand, they licked their lips. They didn't have to think anymore; their instincts took over, and they knew what to do. Will blinked a few times, reeling as the world rocked underneath him, and he found himself back in his own body. On the ground, grasping Hannibal's heart, looking up into Hannibal's eyes.

He took a bite.

Once his teeth sunk into the meat, blood rushing down his throat, there was a massive clap of thunder that sent them both rocketing away from each other. Will slammed against the kitchen cabinets, nearly going deaf from the pressure and noise. A bright light hit his eyes, and he squeezed them shut. The pain, the sticky feeling of blood on his hands, the sounds, the cold, hard floor — he felt all of it fading away bit by bit, until a heavy sense of peace settled over him.

We did it, he thought, and Hannibal's voice rang through his head at the same moment. They were the same now. His thoughts were Hannibal's. Hannibal's thoughts were his. *We did it*.

Then, darkness came for him.

XXXIII- The Illusion

I can't see anything, and I can see everything. I'm being jostled around in someone's arms, held bridal-style — Hannibal's arms. My arms, our arms. I don't know how to describe it anymore. Nothing is mine or his alone.

I don't know where I am, and then I do. I don't even have to think about it. If he knows, I know.

I know everything. I know what we did. I know what they did to us. To me, specifically. I know what's going to happen.

Hannibal is crying onto my body. He's relieved. For now, he is relieved.

"It's okay, Will," he says to me. Either says, or thinks. There's no longer a difference between the two for us. "You've been hurt. But we're going to take care of it."

I can still taste blood on my tongue.

_____

May 7, 2030

When Will finally resurfaced, aware of his surroundings for the first time in days, he woke up in a room his eyes had never seen before.

He would have called it unfamiliar, but he knew deep within him that Hannibal had seen this place before. If Hannibal had seen it, then he knew it, too. It was an exorbitantly nice room, even nicer than Hannibal's home, and he was propped up on soft pillows and covered with soft blankets. He was so heavy and so light at the same time, sinking into the mattress and

floating above it. In a blink, he knew everything Hannibal was thinking, and their thoughts congregated into one realization: he's awake.

He heard footsteps running towards him, and Hannibal appeared in the doorway. Both of their shoulders sagged with relief.

"This is the most active I've felt you be in days," Hannibal said. "You're here. You made it."

Hannibal didn't look any different than normal. There wasn't a hair out of place, and he looked sophisticated even in more casual clothing. He wasn't wearing shoes, which made Will believe they were somewhere familiar to him. Comfortable.

"Not unscathed." Will's hand traveled down to his abdomen, where Hannibal had wrapped his chest with gauze. His sternum ached, pain ringing through his entire upper body. He didn't have to ask what happened. He knew. He could still hear the loud bang in the recesses of their memory.

"What matters is we've escaped." Hannibal sat on the edge of the bed, stroking Will's hair. "We're on another property of mine right now. As soon as you're good to move around, we're getting on a plane."

"Hannibal—"

"I'm going to take us back to Italy. Back to where we met. We can enjoy the romance of Florence, the wonderful food of Rome, the Venetian canals. So many wonderful things to see." His eyes were wild, flooded with adrenaline and a hint of anxiety. "Anywhere you want to go."

"Hannibal." Will placed a hand on his thigh. "We need to talk about everything."

"Let me get you some water. And something to eat. You've hardly been conscious these past few days." He stood before Will could object, like Will's touch scalded him. "I'll be back. Are

you hot? Cold?"

Will stared at him. "...No. No, I'm okay."

Hannibal smiled. "I'll be back."

Will watched him go. There was a sinking feeling inside of him, not in his gut but somewhere in his mind. Like the embodiment of dread was blanketing itself over his brain. This was wrong. All of this was wrong.

Hannibal didn't seem to think so. He returned with a glass of ice water and a plate of bread, cheese, and sliced fruit, setting it on Will's lap. He settled in on the bed next to Will, kissing him on the cheek. He then picked up a dark cube of blood orange with his fingers, holding it up to Will's mouth. Will let himself be fed, the little pods of juice exploding deliciously on his tongue. It was both tangy and sweet. It was the most vivid taste he'd ever experienced.

"Blood oranges aren't in season," he remarked. "They're nowhere near in season."

"I have my ways." Hannibal smiled. "I don't care for oranges unless they're this type. For both taste and aesthetic purposes."

"They fit with your brand." Will swallowed. "Hannibal, can we talk?"

"I don't see what there is to talk about." Hannibal took a bite of orange. "We need to make sure you're fully healed, and then we have work to do. You and I are going to leave this place soon enough."

"You know what there is to talk about. You know exactly what."

"What you and I did back there, in the lab." Hannibal paused. "What we saw inside our mind, that was true to an extent. You and I devouring each other, that was all symbolic. Our minds

painting a picture that was more aesthetically appealing than what actually occurred." He moved his hand to Will's waist, fingers tracing below his navel. That part of his torso, aside from the years-old scar that Hannibal left him in Italy, was bare.

"You and I broke free of our restraints." Hannibal held up his wrists. There were thin, red lines driven into his skin, like he'd fought against the straps that were holding them down and snapped them. Will had similar ones. "We took out the orderlies in the room before anyone could stop us. Tackled them to the ground, shattered the glass in the LOOM helmets and stabbed them." His eyes sparkled with subdued glee at the memory. "Took bites out of their flesh. They opened the doors to get to us, but we were able to overtake them." He glanced down at Will's bandages. "Not without an injury, though. Do you remember any of that?"

"I just remember the sound of the gunshot. The taste of blood." Will blinked. "You carried me out of there."

"I did. I was so worried about you." Hannibal's gaze softened, and he cradled Will's cheek in his hand. "But you made it, and that is the most important thing to me. Once you can comfortably move around, and we don't have to worry about infection, then I will get us on the soonest possible plane."

Will closed his eyes. He could feel Hannibal's bliss, could pretend that things were different for a moment. That they weren't on the run, that they could be normal, free from persecution.

"It feels so nice to share with you," Hannibal said. "It feels so natural, doesn't it? Like you and I were meant to exist with the same mind."

"It feels like home," Will replied. "But, Hannibal, I really want to—"

"There is nothing to talk about," he snapped, face flushing. Almost immediately, though, he regained his composure and let out a deep sigh. "I'm sorry, love. I'm sorry. It's been a stressful few days."

Will stayed silent for a moment. They were going to have to face the truth soon enough, but he knew Hannibal wasn't ready for it. He may never be. He figured the best way to loosen

him up was to talk about something personal, something emotional. They needed the bonding time.

"Can you tell me about Mischa?"

Hannibal didn't react, though Will could sense the way his stomach churned. "You should already know everything that happened. We're in the same mind."

"You asked me to not go into your memories without permission. I still want to honor that." He shrugged. "And I want to hear it from you."

Hannibal stared down at the plate of food. "Mischa shaped me into the person I am now. Her short life was more impactful to me than my decades of experience alone. I don't think I could condense the story into something digestible."

"Then tell me what happened to her. Not how it made you feel, or what led up to it. Just tell me the facts about what happened."

"She is not a homicide case, Will. She was my sister."

"I know that. But this is the digestible version. And we'll talk about the feelings part when you're ready to. We'll take it bit by bit."

Hannibal leaned against him. "Mischa was...the two of us were left alone for a little while. My father was in Russia for work, and my mother...I don't remember exactly where she was. Maybe she went with him, maybe she went to see another family member that was sick. It was winter, and I was thirteen. My parents thought I would be able to stay alone with Mischa. It was just for a few days.

"It was going well, until someone broke into the home. Apparently they'd been keeping an eye on my family for a while, because my father had a large amount of money. My family

inheritance goes back many generations." Hannibal held Will's hand. "They were waiting for my parents to leave, and they wanted to take advantage of the vulnerable children there."

"Oh, God." Will shook his head.

"They broke into the home in the middle of the night and took us hostage there. My memories aren't entirely clear, but I remember that Mischa wouldn't stop crying. Screaming and crying and having a fit. She was so scared, so upset. Only six years old, poor baby." He closed his eyes, processing the story. "Somehow, she found a way to slip past them. She ran out to the barn, and they chased after her. When they caught her, they had had enough of her antics, I suppose, and they--" He stopped, a lump getting caught in his throat.

"They killed her?"

Hannibal nodded. Will wrapped his arm around him, pulling Hannibal's head into his chest and letting the tears flow. He kissed the top of Hannibal's head, fighting back tears of his own.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "It's not fair, and I'm sorry." He knew that there was more to the story that Hannibal wasn't telling him; he remembered the dream he'd had, tasting rotten meat and blood on his tongue. The first time Hannibal had ever eaten another human being, and it was one of the only people he'd ever cared about. He didn't want to pry any further, though, especially with the current situation.

"I'll be alright." Hannibal rested his hand on Will's chest. "I've got you now. We made it out, you and I, and we have plenty of time to spend together."

Will buried his head in Hannibal's hair and began to cry. "...Yeah. Yeah, we do."

2030

Will and Hannibal stood side by side on the Ponte Vecchio, the evening sun reflecting off of their sunglasses. It was a lovely day, as they always were; there was a light breeze rippling the water, and the sun was shining on their skin. They were warm, they were comfortable. It was all perfect.

"Hannibal," Will said, resting his head on the other man's shoulder. "Can we talk?"

"What about?" Hannibal's face was impassive. Will could have been bringing up any subject in the world -- but both of them knew what they were ignoring.

"Are you feeling okay?"

"How could I not, with this view?" He glanced back and forth between Will and the beautiful sunset. "Why do you ask?"

"Do you know what day it is, Hannibal?"

Hannibal paused. "It's Wednesday."

"No, what day? Specifically?"

Once again, it took longer than it should have for Hannibal to answer. Will took hold of his arm, forcing Hannibal to look at him. "You don't know. You have no idea what day it is, do you?"

"Why does it matter? I know we didn't have to work today, because we don't work on Wednesdays." Hannibal smirked. "Neither of us do."

"Hannibal." Will resisted the urge to shake him. "We don't have to go to work. We don't have to do any of this. We don't have to be here." He gestured to the world around them. "We don't have to be anywhere, because we can't. No matter what, we're always in the same place. We're in your head."

"I don't understand what you mean."

"Yes, you do. Hannibal, you're smarter than this. I know you are. Please, you need to come to your senses." Will furrowed his brow. "Do you understand where we are? What happened to me?"

"I don't like this, Will." Hannibal yanked his arm away, turning in the other direction. "I think we should go home."

"There is no home, Hannibal!" Will shouted. Despite the bustling crowd in the town square, no one turned to look; they didn't have the ability to. None of them were real. None of them existed outside of this little world in Hannibal's head. Hannibal turned, though, and he stared at Will like he'd never seen him before.

"What are you talking about?"

"Hannibal. Wake up. Please, you have to understand what's going on." Will felt tears brimming in his eyes. "You know what happened to me on that day in the lab, right? You remember what happened?"

"We escaped."

"No, Hannibal. We didn't. We *didn't*!" The world began to rock underneath them, the rocks of the bridge crumbling and falling into the water. Hannibal's eyes shone with tears of his own. "I was shot. Don't you remember?"

"You were shot. But I took you out of there, and you made it. It took a little while for you to heal, but you made it."

"I didn't make it, Hannibal. I got shot in the chest, and I *died*."

Hannibal made a guttural sound somewhere between a gasp and a sob, and the illusion of their freedom fell apart before their eyes. The shining sun, the breeze across the river, the warmth on their skin -- there was no more. Instead, they were only surrounded by darkness, as if Hannibal couldn't even muster the effort to create another place. Not even the mansion they were so used to.

They were alone, and it was dark, and—

"Let me tell you the truth, Hannibal."

XXXIV- The Prison

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

2030

"Let me tell you the truth, Hannibal."

"Don't do this to me. Please, Will." Hannibal buried his face in his hands. His voice was the only sound in the space.

"We need to talk about this. This can't go on any longer."

"No. Please, let me live like this for a little while longer. Please."

"It's been long enough, Hannibal. You don't have to give this up, but I at least want you to acknowledge it." Will went to him and stroked his arm. "You can't do this to yourself."

"I don't want to acknowledge it. Why must I?" Hannibal nearly collapsed against him, his strength failing him. He'd been upholding the illusion for so long that now, he had no more resolve. He'd lost everything. "Why can't I exist in this place forever with you? Why do you have to break me like this?"

"Because I'm still here. I'm still with you, and I want to talk about it." Will began to cry alongside him. "I'm not something you can control, like the rest of this world. You and I merged. We share the same brain, and that's still the case. I don't know how, and I don't understand the science or spirituality or whatever behind it all, but when I died, I stayed in your head. I'm not part of your imagination. I'm as real as I was before, when we would travel into this place."

"I know you're real. That's the only thing keeping me alive." Hannibal cried. "It's the only thing that gives me hope anymore, Will."

"So there is a part of you that knows the truth. There's a part of you that realizes what happened."

"Yes. But I'm doing my very best to ignore it." He groaned. "Please, just let me ignore it. Please."

"I want you to understand what this means for me, too, Hannibal. I was in my body, existing as myself, and now I don't have a body anymore. I'll never have a body again."

"You can have mine. I don't want it anymore." Hannibal sounded more defeated than he ever had. "I never want to use it again."

"I don't want that."

"You have the next closest thing to your body. Even though you are locked in here, I've made it as lifelike as I can." He took Will's hand, squeezing it tightly and kissing his knuckles. "Will, I'll give you anything you could ever want. I can bring you anywhere you've ever wanted to go, give you any object you could ever ask for. Even if it's a place I've never seen, I can ask for books, I can--"

"Tell me what you mean by that. Do you understand where you are right now?"

Hannibal swallowed. "I'm in...I'm in jail. I've been arrested. And I'm all alone..."

"Hannibal." Will wrapped his arms around him. "Hannibal, Hannibal, Hannibal."

He was inconsolable. Will knew he had to fix this somehow; he needed to bring Hannibal somewhere familiar. He searched through their shared space for the image of the palace, and

that wonderful evening sun returned, this time shining through the stained glass windows. The marble floor was solid underneath them, and Will was able to guide Hannibal across it into the main room. He led Hannibal into one of the chairs by the fireplace and let him fall into it, crouching down to hug him tightly.

"We merged. You were right in that we broke free of our restraints and tried to attack the orderlies, but we didn't make it much farther. We had our teeth in another man's flesh when Jack and the officers got in."

"They shot you."

"They did. And they got me practically right in the heart. I think it was pretty rapid." Will could only hear a bang, the residual ringing of his ears. He didn't remember any pain, anything that came after. He only remembered Hannibal's palace, being carried through a fake forest as Hannibal tried to convince himself it was all going to be okay.

"I never got to say goodbye."

"You don't have to say goodbye. I never went anywhere."

"I let you die. I could have done something."

"Could you have? We were lost in our own world, Hannibal. It all happened so fast."

"Since you were already in my head, in our space...you stayed there. I suppose your mind wasn't killed along with your body, since it was someplace else at the time. It had nowhere else to go, so...it came to me."

"Yes. This is where Will Graham lives now. This is the only place you can find him."

"We were supposed to have a life together. We were supposed to do everything."

"I know. I know, and it's not fair. I wish things could be different." Will rubbed his back. "I'm so sorry, Hannibal."

"Are you that miserable?" Hannibal lifted his head, looking at Will with red and irritated eyes. "Are you so sad to be here that you had to break the facade?"

"I...no, I'm not miserable. It's just odd. After all, I only know what you know. If you choose to forget something, then so do I. I don't know what day it is, either. Hell, it might not even be the same year. I don't know what things are like in the real world. I don't know how long it's been, or where you are. I don't know the outcome of your trial. I don't know if the people we attacked are still alive." He began to stare off into space, realizing just how little he was aware of. He was completely under the influence of Hannibal's mind; no longer a real person, no longer someone independent.

But that was what he'd wanted, wasn't it? That was what they'd both set out to do. They wanted to be a combined entity, living in the same brain. It had just taken Will's death for that to happen.

"I'm sorry. I've trapped you here. I've put you in a prison of your own." Tears ran down Hannibal's face. "But I wouldn't even know where to start if I wanted to get you out."

"I don't think there is a way for me to get out."

"If you are desperate, perhaps my death would stop this misery for both of us. Maybe--"

"Stop. I don't want you to die. Not after all of this."

"I'm going to die anyway, I'm sure. After conning my way out of an arrest for so long, I don't think anyone can get me an insanity plea. Not even the best lawyer." He gave a shaky exhale. "There's a chance I could be given the federal death penalty."

Will shuddered at the thought of Hannibal being executed. The image flashed through their mind, a vivid scene of Hannibal's body smoking in an electric chair or slumping over after being injected with poison. It felt barbaric, an undignified end for someone who had left such an impact on the world. He'd always thought Hannibal would get an artful death, one of his own volition.

"I'm sorry I've been in such terrible denial. I know it's been confusing, and terrifying, and...I'm so sorry, Will. I'm so sorry."

"I just wanted my Hannibal back," Will replied softly. "This person that you've been pretending to be, oblivious to the rest of the world...it's not you. I don't like who you became."

"I know. I don't like it, either." He shook his head. "It's just simple. It's so much more simple than having to face what really happened to you. This way, I can pretend that we escaped, and that things are the way I wanted them to be."

"We can still pretend. I just want to play a more active role in it." He got up from the floor, migrating to the chair right beside him and sitting down. "I want you to understand what this is like for me. I don't have my own body anymore. I don't have my mind, my autonomy. I've been a slave to the things you want, the things you're thinking. If you want to be in Florence, we're in Florence. If you want it to be a Wednesday at sunset, that's what will happen. And for me, it's like I'm being pulled around like a puppet on a string. You've forgotten that I'm not just another product of your palace."

"I've lost myself, and I'm losing you because of it." Hannibal closed his eyes. Their surroundings suddenly became stronger, the objects more opaque. Will heard the sound of rain on the room's skylight, and a fire suddenly roared to life inside the fireplace. "I've forgotten that this is supposed to be our home, not just mine."

"Let's make it our home." Will held out his hand. "This place belongs to us now."

"I wish we had a place to ourselves in the real world."

"This is the next best thing. And I'm always going to be here for you." Will raised his eyebrows. "Please, Hannibal?"

Hannibal stared at his hand, blinking back tears. With resolve, he finally reached out and took it.

"We're going to create something beautiful. Something that belongs to both of us. And we'll exist there until the times change. Until the situation calls for something different."

"Until they kill me." Hannibal gave a humorless smirk.

"And then we'll really be together. Think of it that way."

"Give me a moment." Hannibal squeezed his hand before letting go. He got up from his chair, pacing towards the fireplace. In front of them, the world split apart, a window into the real world opening up. It was a rude awakening; everything was grey, metallic, and cramped. There was nothing but an empty cell, Hannibal's wrists heavy with chains. Inside the palace, Hannibal watched with a lowered brow, grieving the self that he'd become.

There was a clock outside the cell. It was an electronic one, showing date, time, year, and even temperature. Hannibal stared at it, the green numbers reminding him of this ugly reality.

"It's one fifty-two in the afternoon," Hannibal said to Will inside their mind. "It's June fifteenth, twenty-thirty. It's been a month and ten days since you died."

The window began to grow larger, reality storming back towards them at an unnerving pace. Hannibal took a step back, afraid of what it would bring if he let it overtake him. He didn't want to go back there. It was his worst nightmare.

"My name is Hannibal Lecter, and I'm all alone."

Will stood up quickly, taking hold of Hannibal's hand. Hannibal turned towards him, startled, and Will kissed him on the lips. Hannibal sank into it, and the room grew warmer. The sound of rain grew stronger. The window shrank rapidly, and then it closed forever.

"Not anymore," Will said. "Not anymore."

September 2, 2031

Barney Matthews sauntered through the freezing halls of Death Row, his young trainee only halfway paying attention to the words he was saying. Coaching fresh meat was Barney's least favorite part of the job; people were more interested in gawking than doing their job right. And it was an unfortunate necessity. Most of the workers Barney trained wouldn't last more than a year. It usually coincided with the first execution — there was something about watching an emaciated prisoner walk out of their cell and never come back that took a toll on the average citizen.

"Most of the procedures when it comes to food handling are more strict," he explained half-heartedly. "Whatever you do, don't reach through the damn bars. We've nearly had fingers taken off that way. Food goes through the slot in the door, and then the slot is immediately closed. Don't linger."

The employee — Barney had already forgotten his name — nodded along. Barney had the urge to quiz him on it, but he pushed it away. He didn't get paid enough for that.

"We're supposed to search each cell three times a week. That usually doesn't happen. Once a week is a delight for me, if we can handle it."

"What if we find something they're not supposed to have?"

"Contraband should be reported to me. I'll take care of it."

"Anyone I should look out for in particular?"

"All of the violent ones are under my care. For you, I'll try and ease you into it. Might be a good idea to start with someone like Lecter. Cell eighty-one."

"Like, *Hannibal* Lecter?"

Barney stopped walking, sighing. "Yes. Hannibal Lecter. Here, c'mere."

The guy blushed. "Oh, I don't—"

"If you can't handle seeing the inmates, you don't need to be here."

He didn't respond. Instead, he followed Barney silently down the hall, watching the numbers climb up until they reached cell eighty-one. Barney peeked through the small window, gazing at the man through the bars.

Hannibal Lecter lay on the bed with his eyes closed, as he did nearly twenty-four hours a day. He refused to leave the cell, even for recreation, and not a single soul had visited him since his arrival. He almost never woke, not even for meals. Barney could usually get him to eat one big meal a day, and he would choke it down in minutes before laying back down and returning to that comatose state.

"His execution date isn't for another year. I'll miss him, honestly. He's the easiest guy to take care of," Barney said. Hannibal never stirred. It was easy to gossip about him, since he never seemed to hear anyone in the outside world. "Real polite. He'll respect you if you respect him. Won't attack you or nothing."

"Even after everything he did?"

"Even after. Hell, even during. You know how respected he was? Doctor, surgeon, artist, musician...chef."

The employee shuddered. They stared at him in silence for a short moment.

"Is it true that he hasn't said a word? Not anything at all? Or is that an exaggeration?"

Barney couldn't tear his eyes away from Hannibal. He had that effect on people. There was something about his level of peace that made others envy him.

What Barney didn't know — what no one knew — was that Hannibal Lecter wasn't really there. He was on a canal in Venice, watching the sun rise with another man and their dog. He was savoring a bite of gelato, a sip of wine. He had his hands around the waist of his lover, a smile forming on their faces. He was being kissed on the cheek by someone with dark curls. He was stroking those curls before bed, feeling the weight of another person curled up against him.

But that wasn't what Barney saw. That wasn't what the trainee saw. That world was built only for two.

"Not a single word."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for the support on this story!! It means a lot. I’m currently working on a rewritten version of FOUND because my writing has improved a lot since then and I have some new things I want to introduce to the story. Be on the lookout for that this new year!

My personal Instagram is @therealsolomon.writer

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